

## AN INVITATION TO CONTENTMENT

*O Lord God, grant us peace, for you have given us all things. Grant us the peace of quietness, the peace of the Sabbath which has no evening.*

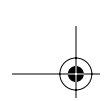
ST. AUGUSTINE



Chale (Shay-lee), my old Border-collie-mix, and I have run together for twelve years. We do this only about once a week now, given her aging body, and mine. On other days we walk. Autumn outings satisfy us the most. Sometimes a mist rises from the pond we pass on our way to Winfield Mounds, and as we cross the bridge over the DuPage River we occasionally spot deer feeding in the water. Chale is old enough to resist the chase; instead she perks up her ears and lifts her nose to inhale what she can of deer, squirrel and rabbit. I am old enough to release myself from the pressure to Keep Moving and can stand and watch—appreciating the wonder of sharing the world with creatures that continue to live relatively unchanged by the changing world around them.

In the fall the squirrels scour for nuts, the perennials go into hiberna-





tion, the cicadas and crickets die off, and the Canadian geese fly south. When Chale and I walk through the neighborhood, I kick through leaves the wind has blown into piles against the curb. They crunch and crackle beneath my feet. When Chale stops to mark her territory, I pick up maple, oak and ash leaves that I will press and then dip into melted wax at home and display through Thanksgiving.

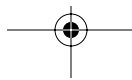
At night I'll light a fire in the fireplace, and a few candles besides. The warm flames and scents of wood and wax comfort me during these shortening days and lengthening nights. Another year marked by autumn routines, sustained by the presence of God.

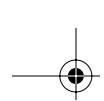
We are surrounded by simple pleasures and the possibility of sipping and savoring our very earthy, very physical life. Contentment awaits us, inviting us to savor each moment, and in doing so to honor the God who gave us life.

Yet most of us find contentment elusive. Although we are encouraged to pursue our dreams and aspire to great things, we are marginally content at best. Actually it all does make sense. If I have high expectations to be content and fulfilled and perceive myself as being obligated to stretch toward happiness, then I am likely to focus on what I do not possess and pursue choices that might make me more satisfied. At any point I can switch jobs, drop one significant relationship to pick up another, change churches, and relocate out of my neighborhood or community. My ability to be content will be undermined by my high expectations for happiness and fulfillment.

Too easily we live unexamined and disconnected lives, distracting ourselves in our quest for greater ease, comfort or the acquisition of better stuff. But there is another way that leads toward a more certain contentment. From a Roman prison Paul writes the church in Philippi and tells them that he has learned the secret of being content:

Always be full of joy in the Lord. I say it again—rejoice! Let everyone





see that you are considerate in all you do. Remember, the Lord is coming soon.

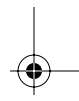
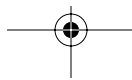
Don't worry about anything; instead, pray about everything. Tell God what you need, and thank him for all he has done. If you do this, you will experience God's peace, which is far more wonderful than the human mind can understand. His peace will guard your hearts and minds as you live in Christ Jesus.

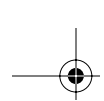
And now, dear brothers and sisters, let me say one more thing as I close this letter. Fix your thoughts on what is true and honorable and right. Think about things that are pure and lovely and admirable. Think about things that are excellent and worthy of praise. Keep putting into practice all you learned from me and heard from me and saw me doing, and the God of peace will be with you. . . .

For I have learned how to get along happily whether I have much or little. I know how to live on almost nothing or with everything. I have learned the secret of living in every situation, whether it is with a full stomach or empty, with plenty or little. For I can do everything with the help of Christ who gives me the strength I need. (Phil 4:4-9, 11-13)

God's goodness and Jesus' incarnation, life, death and resurrection are the source of Paul's contentment, and ours. Without this foundation our contentment risks being shallow, temporal, rooted in uncertain circumstances.

God conquered evil, liberating and reconciling the world through the atoning work of Christ. In an act of divine and supreme love, God showed that compassion is greater than the world's evil.<sup>1</sup> Our feet can walk lightly—the burden of our sin has been lifted. We rejoice and thank God for all God has done, and fix our thoughts on what is true, honorable and right. Contentment can grow deep in our bones because our soul has been reconciled to God. Creation is being restored, and will ul-





timately be fully restored. Contentment, hope and peace flow from the comfort of knowing that God is the Victor, even as the earth groans for the coming restoration (Rom 8:19-22).

The Hebrews are told to be content with what they have. The author of the New Testament letter to them then writes:

“For God has said,

‘I will never fail you.

I will never forsake you.’

That is why we can say with confidence,

‘The Lord is my helper,

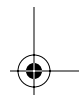
so I will not be afraid.

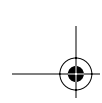
What can mere mortals do to me?’” (Heb 13:5-6).

Hebrews was written to the first-century church when persecution of Christian Jews threatened its very existence. We, like they, are encouraged to hold fast to faith while remembering the sufficiency of God’s love to overcome evil in a violent world, to be an ever-present help, and to transform us into people who love and live rightly. Contentment is possible because of the work of Jesus Christ.

The Hebrews were to be content with what they had, even if that meant persecution and death. God desires the same for us, whatever good or ill may come. When we pursue contentment and savor life, we are saying that God is good, God is the Victor, and God will not leave us nor forsake us, even in the midst of chaos and trouble. We have nothing to fear. Our soul is safe. We can welcome a life tapestry woven with threads both painful and joyous, because we are loved and held by a personally present God.

Early on in life I decided I wanted to learn this art of savoring life. Mostly it was for practical reasons. Some old people had faces that wrinkled into smiles instead of frowns, and I wanted one of those when I grew old. I figured I needed to learn at a young age what it took to get one, so I started watching how people lived. People responded to every-





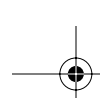
day life differently, and I decided I'd rather be like Charlie (a friend of our family who had a face already destined to wrinkle into smiles in another twenty years) than like my third-grade teacher, Mr. Neal. Everyone loved Charlie, who generally loved life. His eyes looked like mischief waiting to happen. No one liked Mr. Neal, who didn't seem to like anyone or much of anything.

Then there was Uncle Jerry, who laughed a lot, embraced life and paid me quarters to tell my other uncles that he was my favorite. His face has learned to wrinkle into smiles. Some, like my piano teacher Mrs. Johnson, oozed gentleness. She looked right at me when we talked, and she listened with her whole body, engaging me and my lonely junior high life while we waited for my mother to pick me up after my lesson. I saw my father take delight in things like a horned toad sunning on a rock in Arizona, or shooting stars, or a cold glass of sun-brewed iced tea on a hot summer day. Gradually I learned that life hadn't been easy for those folks, but they had found ways to savor it just the same—not perfectly, and not always, but enough so that they had become contented souls that blessed those around them. They inspired me.

Sometime later I also learned that savoring life is bigger than me savoring *my* life. I belong to something much larger than myself. We all belong to God and each other, to those who came before us, and to those who will follow. We are part of the glorious creation made by the hands, voice and Spirit of God. To savor life, then, is to savor more than just my life. It is to savor and hold as dear this entire magnificent, wonderful miracle of God's creation.

For some the art of savoring life seems to come as naturally as breathing, but others of us have to learn it. I'm still learning to savor a world that's not the idyllic vision I once cherished. I think I am searching for Eden. I need reminding that contentment is rooted in the work of Christ and is to be experienced here and now in the small wonders, the miracles, evidence of redemption that is constantly unfolding around me.



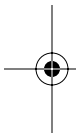


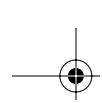
Jesus showed God's love to us so completely and compellingly that we respond with gratitude. Jesus' life inspires, not simply by example but through a power to transform, enabling us to love God, others and creation as he did. Contentment flows from a life transformed and rightly lived. I value contentment, am called to be content and am finding joy in striving toward that obedience.

Learning any skill requires three things: gaining some relevant knowledge, learning the appropriate component skills and then practicing. In the following pages I explain how principles of contentment have been understood and practiced throughout history, explore how those principles can be applied to the particular challenges of our cultural context, and then encourage our taking up the practice of contentment—of savoring life.

But no matter how much we practice or how good we get at it, it's important to know up front that our soul will never be completely satisfied. We are eternal creatures made to experience something deeper and wider than our present earthly existence can satisfy. Full contentment will always elude us. So long as we live between Eden and heaven, we will yearn for something more.

Central to developing the art of savoring life is holding a hope that what our soul longs for will be satisfied someday. Hope helps us accept disappointment and even suffering, with the knowledge that God is present and will ultimately heal the wounds of a broken and distorted world, fulfilling the desires and longings of wounded and broken people. Meanwhile we relish the smell of autumn, an outdoor summer concert or a walk with a good friend. And hope strengthens its hold on our soul as we buy lunch for a homeless woman and work toward social change that will leave fewer children, women and men homeless. In so living we express a yearning for *shalom*—the peace experienced when the sun rises and sets on a world that is right and just. Contentment expresses hope in *shalom*. We listen to, mourn with and work to respond to cries for justice and redemption, while celebrating what is already





beautiful and in the process of being restored.

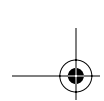
I am a sociologist, one of those people who makes observations about how popular trends and sweeping social movements influence the way people come to think about themselves and then justify, organize and live out their lives. We look at personal choices people make in light of how a particular time and place in history has defined and shaped public issues and social troubles. Writing in the 1950s, sociologist C. W. Mills called this the “sociological imagination.”<sup>2</sup> The permission to observe in this way—to observe and to connect the dots between personal experiences, social trends and public issues—drew me to sociology. I wanted to know how it happens that justice and *shalom* sometimes characterize a family, community, society or nation, though injustice and strife are generally so common. And how do beliefs affect behavior, so that some cultures came to place such a high value, for example, on technology and consuming?

Sociologists can be a cynical bunch—critiquing social structures, looking for hidden and not-so-hidden power struggles, exploring the interplay between the haves and the have-nots. Perhaps as an adult I needed to revive my childhood interest in happy souls because the discipline of sociology can incline me to despair. I need to be led back time and again to a transcendent hope that roots me in what is good and hopeful and beautiful about life. I want to be a contented soul that savors life in the midst of its ruin as well as its beauty.

Finding our way back requires realizing that we easily lose our way. We need to think carefully about where we want to be and determine whether we are on a road that will take us there. In *Mere Christianity*, C. S. Lewis summarizes the challenge before us:

We all want progress. But progress means getting nearer to the place where you want to be. And if you have taken a wrong turning, then to go forward does not get you any nearer. If you are on the wrong road, progress means doing an about-turn and walking





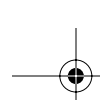
back to the right road; and in that case the man who turns back soonest is the most progressive man. . . . And I think if you look at the present state of the world, it is pretty plain that humanity has been making some big mistake. We are on the wrong road. And if that is so, we must go back. Going back is the quickest way on.<sup>3</sup>

Wanting to learn the art of savoring life, I started hunting down contented souls. Some are alive and well and told me their own stories. I learned some by reading biographies or reading their own thoughts written down long ago. None of them are perfect people—they all have weaknesses, foibles and sins—and this gives me hope. The glory of God has shone through their human frailty as they learned to walk with contentment.

As I watched, read and listened to the stories of contented souls, theories of atonement kept emerging as points of connection. Many of them are trying to live the Good Life, a moral life, a life exemplified by love. They tend to live with hope, believing God is already the Victor and miracles happen. And finally, they live with peace—souls reconciled to and loved by God, who promises never to leave or forsake us. An ability to accept suffering, a consistent movement toward authentic connection with others, and holding to the hope for *shalom* characterize many whose contentment has seeped deep into their bones.

This book, then, is the culmination of my observations and reflections on the art of savoring life, clustered into eight characteristics of contented souls. Contentment that goes deep into our bones comes from placing our final hope in something yet to come, refusing to believe that all we'll get is whatever we can squeeze out of our seventy years or so on earth. So finding contentment starts with recognizing that we are souls that belong, rather than "consumers" (chapter two). Maintaining a posture of contentment takes fortitude, a willingness to sometimes embrace or sit with struggle rather than to be in a frenzy to escape it (chapter three). Contented

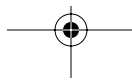
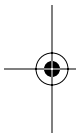


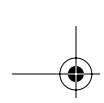


souls exhibit a life-giving mellowness of heart (chapter four) that invites and welcomes rather than asserts or demands. Stretching toward contentment sometimes involves recognizing that we have lost our way and that finding it again takes a turning of sorts—accepting some limits on what has become a limitless life (chapter five). Those with contented souls are nourished by their ability to live intentionally—to look for small wonders, inhaling and absorbing the rich fullness that breathes around us, that is part of our very existence (chapter six), and they see through the superficialities of our consumer-driven life and desire to walk gently, to live as Jesus would live, mindful of all life, aware of our life-sustaining connection to the earth on which we live (chapter seven). The contented souls I have observed recognize the blessing that comes from belonging to others, from welcoming obligations and nurturing relationships despite living in a climate that encourages us to focus instead primarily on careers, acquisitions or achievements (chapter eight). And finally, contented souls remember. They are mindful of the past, of God’s ongoing sustenance and plan for redemption, and their place in the long stream of humanity from which their life came (chapter nine).

Quakers have a tradition of using queries to prompt us toward deeper reflection about our lives. Following that tradition, I offer “queries for further reflection” at the end of each chapter for those who want to move beyond reading to journal, discuss or practice a life more characterized by contentment. You may want to journal responses to any question or questions that resonate with you, or use the questions in small group discussions with others reading alongside you.

May these pages call us to a contentment rooted in a God who loves us and calls us to be present to our earthy, physical existence as we journey toward *shalom*. Come walk with me. Let’s kick up some leaves and later sip coffee—or tea or hot cocoa—while we savor the remains of the day and contemplate the presence of God in the quiet of our candlelit room.





QUERIES FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

- What drew you to this book? What do you hope to get out of it?
- Do you have particular expectations for what this book *should* say about contentment? Are you willing to be challenged in how you think about contentment, and how you live—to even, perhaps, be made uncomfortable?

