

Part One

Planning Your Garden

HE HAS OTHER WAYS FOR OTHERS
TO FOLLOW HIM; ALL DO NOT GO BY
THE SAME PATH. IT IS FOR EACH OF
US TO LEARN THE PATH BY WHICH HE
REQUIRES US TO FOLLOW HIM, AND
TO FOLLOW HIM IN THAT PATH.

—ST. KATHARINE DREXEL

1.

Stuck in the Mud

When I woke up in a dorm bed that was supposedly a “tall” but was still a solid five inches too short, I knew I’d hit rock bottom.

My rock bottom didn’t look like other people’s, but it was uniquely mine: a pounding head, a fuzzy mouth, a missing roommate who was surely off studying after a night out. (“I do everything intensely. You should know this about me,” Elle told me one of the first times we met. “I study intensely. I party intensely. I celebrate intensely. I’m just an intense person.” She also does friendship intensely, which is why she’s one of my nearest and dearest to this day.) It was fall but already cold; our ancient dorm building never felt properly heated, and my thin comforter picked up from Kohl’s shortly before Welcome Week wasn’t doing the trick. I missed my thick afghan from home, and that was it: the needle that broke this exhausted camel’s back.

It was time to admit that I hated college.

I hate it here. That was the thought that popped into my head and wouldn’t leave. I hated my stupid required classes, I hated the huge lecture halls, I hated the nasty dining hall food. I hated my too-small bed and the communal showers and the elevators that smelled like puke. I remember calling my mom, forever my support person when I was sobbing uncontrollably, and trying to problem solve. She’s good in a crisis, good at talking out messy knots until they’re smooth. Maybe I just had to stick it out. Maybe I had to drop a class. Maybe I had to transfer schools. Maybe I had to come home more on the weekends. It should be noted that my parents lived twenty minutes away from my dorm; truthfully, I likely needed

to go home *less* and spend more time adapting. But there were so many other things bubbling up under the issue. Yes, I hated the classes, and I was never really one for lecture-style learning, but it was more than that.

I was lonely. I was ridiculously, heartbreakingly, excruciatingly lonely. I had people to eat with in the dining hall, but I had no soul friends, like my lifelong best friend, who was living her best life at the University of Minnesota. Most of the people I spent time with were drunk on both freedom and crappy vodka bought with fake IDs. Just before school started, I had a friendship-ending disagreement with my only real friend that had chosen to go to college in our hometown, and from what I could see, he seemed to be absolutely loving college.

I was convinced there was something wrong with me. Why didn't I find this as fun as everyone else? Was I missing some kind of joy gene? Why did other people seem to suddenly have these large groups of friends, while I pretended that I wasn't feeling well so I could lay in bed and watch the Kardashians, not talking to anyone? Why was I waking up on Sunday mornings and not running off to the library with a big group of friends, wishing instead more than anything that I was curled up on my parents' sofa watching the Packers and looking through catalogues with my mom and sister, a fire crackling in the background?

But the University of Wisconsin had been somewhere I'd always wanted to go. I'd entertained the idea of other colleges, but I'd grown to love the city of Madison, and they had a great journalism program I was planning on applying to. The thought of transferring wasn't an option, either: I was already homesick and couldn't imagine relocating somewhere further. At the bare minimum, I knew my way around campus like the back of my hand. Being a University of Wisconsin Badger was in my blood. I didn't want to leave.

So I pushed through, spending as much time as possible at home and planning on moving into a ramshackle flat with one of my older brother's friends for sophomore year. But things just felt like they were getting worse. I spent the summer after my freshman year studying abroad in Australia, which didn't help the homesickness issue, and when I returned, I found that not living in the same

dorm as my few college friends wasn't going to help the loneliness situation.

The first semester of sophomore year, I felt like someone was just stomping on me every single day. A boy broke my heart—although, knowing what I know now about love, I want to laugh and cry and give little Sophomore Claire a hug for the delusions of romance and heartbreak she had over *that* situation. My grandmother died. We had always been close, and she truly embodied my childhood in so many ways. Her missing presence made every single day feel more difficult. And then, the final blow: I was denied from the journalism program I had wanted so badly to study in. My reason for going to this university destroyed in a thin rejection letter. *We regret to inform you that your dreams are meaningless and your GPA sucks; perhaps consider putting down the tequila shot and picking up a textbook.*

If you were to look out the window on a Wisconsin January day, you'd see how I felt that year: Frozen. Barren. Honestly, pretty dead.

The silver sky didn't have any sunlight to shine down, and the plants were hiding deep down in the mud.

It was a dark, cold winter.

There was very little blooming happening.

At these times in our lives—when unbearably heavy loads weigh down our backs—the first thing we need to do is evaluate.

It sounds so cold and calculating, but I'm not talking about whipping out a pros and cons spreadsheet, although those can certainly be helpful. I'm talking about some good old-fashioned prayer. We need to turn to God and say, as plainly as possible, "This isn't looking how I want it to look. What should I do about it?"

Yes, this book is about blooming no matter where you're planted, about finding growth in unlikely places. But before we can get there, we need to know where we're supposed to be. Because the truth is, we don't want to use our circumstances as an excuse, either. When we're in a period of desolation, there are likely concrete changes we *can* make to our lives to change our circumstances.

Sure, maybe God wants you to grow through a season of homesickness by you staying where you are and establishing a community for yourself there. But, um, maybe he wants you to move home.

Or maybe God wants you to use your singleness as a time to start a nonprofit that will change lives. But he also might want you to sign up for CatholicMatch.

Sometimes God is yelling, “*Move!*” while we sit and try to figure out which type of glue we should use to stick our feet to the floor.

Before we can dive deep into blooming where we’re planted, we have to make sure God doesn’t want us to uproot a few things. Why do we need to start here? Because otherwise, I fear that you will read this book and hear it as a decree to live where you are, right now, no matter what.

But during that season of my life, God wanted me to adjust my trajectory. I had to do some inner work to figure out what was going wrong and how I could change my situation. It’s like that age-old story about the man who is drowning but keeps insisting that God will save him even when an emergency plane comes to help. When he winds up in heaven, he’s like, “What the heck, God? I thought you were going to save me!” And God’s like, “Um, I tried. I sent you an emergency plane.”

God sent me to a church community that helped me learn about him, make new friendships that would better my soul, and sort of shame me into boosting my GPA. I had to reorder my days and change the way I was living.¹ God wanted me to *change* something about my situation. He wanted me to change my actions, to undertake an external transformation in order to undergo an internal one.

Often times, we jump immediately to how we can spiritually surrender to a situation. This is a move fraught with good intentions, but it’s important that we also evaluate what small, actionable changes we can make to improve our lives. God wants to work *with* us. You can beg him for peace about your situation, but maybe you’re just in a bad situation that you need to get out of.

Maybe you need to set up a boundary and end things with that boyfriend.

Maybe you need to leave that job that isn’t paying you enough to get by.

Maybe you need to seek out a counselor that can walk you through some of your struggles with mental health.

Maybe you need to invest some money in a course that will teach you a new skill.

Jesus had a different direction for almost everyone he encountered. He asked the rich young man to sell everything he had and follow him (Mt 19:16–22). He approved of Zacchaeus’s plan to make amends with the people he had wronged (Lk 19:1–10). He asked Peter to lead his Church (Mt 16:16–19). Instead of calling him to be a disciple, Jesus left John the Baptist to stay right where he was and keep going (Lk 3:15–22). Just because he is asking *this* person to do something does not mean that is *your* calling.

My friend Patty Breen is one of the most beautiful, courageous examples of this to me. She’s a writer for *Blessed is She* as well as a Midwesterner with a passion for ministry. A few years ago, she sought a divorce and annulment after she realized she was in an unhealthy marriage.

“I never dreamed as a young Catholic woman I would find myself navigating these messy spaces in my story,” Patty said. “I saw I was simply surviving and not thriving, and after much prayer and seeking counsel, I decided the only option I had left was to walk away. Afterward, I knew I needed deeper healing and wholeness. I needed to take responsibility for my part in our marriage’s failure but also acknowledge all the things I dragged into marriage. I needed to process childhood wounds, traumas, and my own baggage.”

Marriage is a vocation that in today’s society is so often belittled and overlooked. It’s no longer seen as an everlasting union but as one that can be easily tossed aside for a variety of reasons. The Catholic Church has been one of the greatest champions of marriage, insisting on the importance of family structures and providing resources in order to strengthen marriages. But there are times when marriages are not of God. There are times when the brave thing to do is not to stay but to ask God if you need to leave.

“I saw the annulment process as another tool to facilitate my own healing. In time, it helped me to choose to forgive my former husband and learn lessons about grace and mercy I never knew I needed. Catholics who experience the devastating pain of divorce are not outside the loving gaze of Jesus. He wants you to know he

sees the whole of your experience, and Jesus wants you to experience healing,” Patty explained.

Listen, sister. I’m not telling you to run for the door. I’m not telling you to radically change your entire life.

I’m telling you to do what Patty did.

I’m telling you to pray.

Prayer! Prayer is so underrated, maybe because it’s not as Instagram worthy as attending a rally or artfully organizing your refrigerator. To sit in that quiet space of God, to allow him to speak in the silence of your heart, to ask of him what he needs from you and to respond—it’s important work.

Prayer feels like inaction, what with the sitting and talking to someone you can’t see and not getting to knock things off your to-do list at the end of it. I know it’s cool these days to argue about offering prayers versus offering action. But so often, *prayer is action*. If you don’t believe in the power of talking to our risen Lord, if you don’t honestly think that asking him to move or make things clear is *action* or worth your time, then I need to point you back to the gospels. Remember that this is Jesus, who rose from the dead, who fed thousands with a loaf of bread, who made miracles happen. And even he took time away to pray, retreating from the crowds and allowing himself that time to speak to the Father. Jesus knew that prayer needed to be the root of all of his actions.

We have a God who desires to know and love us; in fact, his Son calls us his friends. How are we supposed to know what he wants us to do if we aren’t talking to him?

If you are living in an abusive relationship, in desolate circumstances, or in the grip of addiction, I don’t want you to read this book and walk away thinking, *Well, this is where I’m planted, so I guess I just need to pray more*. But I do want to impress upon you the vitality of a full, rich prayer life, one that looks like rosaries and running errands, one that’s scripture in the morning and scrubbing dishes in the evening, one where you feel such a deep connection to God that you don’t need the perfect prayer circumstances to be speaking to him in your heart.

I can’t tell you if you’re in a situation where you need to uproot or replant, if you’re in a season of growth or death. I *can* tell you that

God hears prayers. I can tell you that there is power in a candle and a cup of coffee and a Bible, that the letters from Peter have changed me, that silence is a powerful wind of the Spirit. Just like Elijah was waiting to hear God in an earthquake and fire and eventually heard him in a whisper, so will we (1 Kgs 19:11–13). We think that God is hiding his will from us, but y'all—he *wants* us to do his will. He will make it known if we ask. He isn't hiding a neon sign under the covers, waiting for it to be revealed. He's longing to be in conversation with us.

Throughout this book, you will hear many stories of people that need to bloom where they're planted. But it's important first to consider whether you need to uproot, like Patty did. Whether you need to dig up a seed and begin again.

Patty told me that the annulment chapter of her life would not define her. That it was only a small piece of the wider tapestry God is designing with her life. That these years have had fruit, that they have helped her encourage other Catholic women feeling desperately alone in similar circumstances.

St. Joan of Arc tells us that if we act, “God will act.”² I can tell you all of the things I will tell you in this book: that we can find sunlight even in the dreariest of seasons, we need time to flourish, and we need to stay connected to our roots. But if you're in the wrong garden, sister, none of this will resonate. Some plants just aren't going to make it in some soil. Try to grow some peonies in the middle of the New Mexican desert and tell me how that works out for you. God has a splendid design for our lives, an intricate plan for us to live with full, complete joy. He is not satisfied with us trying to spiritually tie ourselves to a situation that Isn't Right. He desires to empower us to make the changes we need to make. There is a saying that stagnant water becomes putrid. If we aren't growing, shifting, constantly evaluating where we're at in life, and seeking the face of Christ, we will become putrid, and we will not be living out the lives Christ intended for us to live.

Patty needed to seek an annulment. I needed to get my butt to a church. You may need to do something, too. You may even be in a system that is unjust or unfair, facing consequences from choices that were not yours or policies that are not of the Gospel. You may

be facing real, true struggle, and me telling you to try and bloom feels like a slap in the face.

The choice isn't whether to thrive where you are or change your situation. The truth is that you can do both. You can fight to improve your circumstances while accepting your day-to-day. Living each day as if *that day* is God's will for you, all the while striving toward an ultimate path, is a Gospel-centered blooming, not the tepid, temporary #DreamLife so often shown by reality stars or mommy bloggers. It's a type of blooming that requires a commitment to seeking Christ in all people, even yourself.

Action takes bravery, sister. Pope Francis has said that "we cannot be tepid disciples. The Church needs our courage in order to give witness to truth."³ And we can feel so very uncourageous, so very little.

Good thing we have a very big God.

SOUL-CARE STEPS

- ★ **Make a prayer plan.** Schedule it in, sister. When I was a FOCUS missionary, I used to literally sit with my disciples and write out their prayer plans in their planners. If you don't plan it, it ain't getting done, but you *will* find time to binge-watch three seasons of *The Great British Baking Show*.
- ★ **Text a friend.** Who's in your corner? I know that for many of us, this list may be short or spread across the country. But who in your life is the person you can turn to in a spiritual crisis? Text your mom, former FOCUS discipler, Bible-study leader, friend from high school, whoever, and ask if they can get together for coffee—in person or virtually—sometime this month. (And if you want to make it margaritas instead, nobody in these parts will judge you.) Tell them how you've been feeling lately with this season of life and see if they have any valuable insight. It's vital to make sure this is a person who is *for* you, meaning *for* your salvation—not the kind of friend who's just going to suggest a pedicure, although those friends are great, too. A friend who knows your heart and is in the corner of

Christ—that's who we need in these tricky, trying seasons. When we're feeling overwhelmed, it's so easy to hide, isn't it? But we need to wipe away the dirt and dig our hands into the soil. We need to uncover our roots and look at the hard truths. And the people in our lives can help us do just that.

- ★ **Consider which doors are open.** If you apply to a spiritual community and are rejected, that's a pretty great sign that that isn't where you're meant to go. If you want to move to San Francisco but are barely making rent in small-town Iowa, that's a solid arrow pointing you far away from an expensive housing market. *I just feel like I'm meant to marry him*—let me take your hands, look you in the eyes, and remind you that if he is choosing no, that is the truth of the matter. Knowing what options are actually available to you is incredibly helpful when deciding on your next steps. If you literally can't change your situation, that helps you know that God *isn't* asking you to uproot. Don't worry if that's you, sister—you're in the right place.