

This document is the Foreword and Introduction to Robin Phillips's forthcoming book *How to Live the Good Life...even when everything is going wrong*. This free download is for promotional purposes only.

Foreword

By Cherie Calbom ("the Juice Lady")

It had been a beautiful fourth of July like so many others in Southern California. After a pleasant backyard barbeque with some friends, we put on jackets and watched a firework display in the night sky.

About midnight I made my way back to the house in a nearby neighborhood where I had been house-sitting for friends. It didn't take me long to get snug in bed and to quickly fall fast asleep.

Sometime in the middle of the night I awoke abruptly, shivering. Why was it so cold, I wondered? I rolled over to check my clock, which showed that it was 3:00 am. At that point I noticed that the door to the backyard was open.

"That's funny," I thought to myself. "I was sure I had shut the door."

As I arose from bed to close the door, I suddenly noticed a shirtless man crouched in a corner of the room.

I hardly had time to be afraid before the burglar rushed at me. Pulling a pipe out from his shorts, he began beating me mercilessly, exclaiming, "Now you are dead!"

Trying to defend myself, I managed to knock the pipe out of his hands. But the burglar continued attacking me, attempting to strangle me with his hands until I collapsed.

When I was discovered some time later by neighbors (somehow I had managed to drag myself outside), my hand was split open and my ring finger was barely hanging on by a small piece of skin. I had deep gashes in my scalp and crushed discs in my neck.

In the days that followed in the hospital, I struggled to come to terms with the new life that lay ahead of me. The injuries to my hand were so severe that the hand surgeon said I would never be able to use it again.

As bad as the physical devastation had been, my inner wounds were more severe and took longer to heal. The brokenness left in my soul seemed far more shattering than the tear in my scalp, the crushed discs in my neck, or the broken bones in my right hand. In fact, I have often referred to it as an emotional tsunami. Sometimes I would just sit on the floor of my room, overwhelmed with intense inner torment and feeling like I couldn't go on. All I could do was to get through one day at a time.

People who have not experienced this type of intense trauma may find it hard to understand how emotional pain can be more intense, and take longer to heal, than physical pain. But it's true. If you have gone through emotionally demanding experiences—for example, if you've lost a loved one, seen someone killed, or have been regularly subject to verbal or emotional abuse—then you may have some idea what I'm talking about. The emotional wounds we experience can be far more devastating than physical pain. But while our society tends to take someone's pain seriously if it correlates with visible physical injuries, we tend

to marginalize a person's pain when it is invisible. In our quick-fix culture, hurting people can be left thinking *they* are the problem for not being able to toughen up and just get over it.

Sometimes we need to actually take an approach that is counter to our feel-good culture and move towards our pain before we can move away from it. In my own case, I found this paradox at work. I had to be willing to lean into my pain in order to let it go. I had to face the inner wounds before I could fully leave them behind. I had to be honest about the toxic emotions confined inside me before I could complete the journey towards healing and wholeness.

By God's grace, I am completely healed today in both body and soul. I am no longer defined by the emotional wounds of the attack. Moreover, through my writing ministry, television appearances, and wellness retreats, I have the opportunity to minister to thousands of people with the message of hope, healing and wholeness. As I talk to people from all over the world, one of the recurring themes is that people are desperate to know and be known in their pain so they can heal. Often they simply need permission to be themselves, so that they can face their vulnerability and brokenness without shame. This is crucially important, for there cannot be healing unless we first learn to listen to our pain, just as we cannot have courage unless we confront our fears.

That is one of the reasons I am excited about this book. Much of what Robin shares parallels my own journey of healing. He has four chapters that explore the importance of leaning into pain as part of the journey to a place where pain no longer defines us. He also discusses the importance of letting go of the toxic thoughts and scripts that keep us tethered to disordered emotions. He offers a fascinating discussion on recognizing God's presence in every aspect of life, from when you get up in the morning to when you go to sleep at night. He discusses how we can train ourselves in gratitude even when everything is going wrong, and how hope, love and comfort can shine forth even in our darkest moments. He even has an appendix addressing high school graduates, drawing on classical sources to illustrate that human flourishing is not about success or personal happiness, but about cultivating virtue in the midst of vulnerability and brokenness. Above all, Robin has offered a book of comfort and hope to those who are going through pain.

This is a book I wish I had been able to read when I was recovering from the emotional wounds of the burglar attack.

Robin takes up some trendy themes in this book, such as mindfulness, gratitude, and self-care. These are all very popular topics right now, being the latest spin-off of the seventy-year-old positivity bandwagon that started with Norman Vincent Peale's *The Power of Positive Thinking*. Institutes like UC Berkeley's "Greater Good Science Center" have been pouring millions of dollars into researching all the ways we can increase in gratitude, or experience the benefits associated with activities like mindfulness and self-compassion. Robin is also interested in some of these themes, but don't be fooled into thinking this is just one more book about the latest self-help trends. By taking the Scriptural and Patristic witness as his starting point, Robin has been able to dispense with the egocentricity that usually pervades these topics while still gleaning from the contemporary research. As a result, Robin has been able to give us something that the other resources do not. Instead of showing how to achieve great things for yourself, Robin is content to show how you can

take baby steps for God. This is a book about the small things of life. And throughout it all, Robin takes seriously the fact that pain and vulnerability are an integral part of our human experience. As such, Robin's work on gratitude and learned optimism are situated within the realism and messiness of everyday life. As he explains in chapter 8,

“Gratitude is not about gritting your teeth and saying things are fine when they are not. Rather, true gratitude involves acknowledging your sufferings, accepting them, and then interpreting pain in a spiritual way. Gratitude gives you the power to dare greatly, with a courageous vulnerability that is able to stand up after defeat, striving valiantly for what is most meaningful to you.”

And again from Chapter 10:

“Just as we cannot attain wisdom without facing our doubts and we cannot attain courage without facing our fears, so we cannot attain strength without embracing our weakness and vulnerability.”

I hope I've got you excited about reading this book.

When Robin asked me to write this Foreword, he said it was because of the role that my husband, Fr. John, and I had played in his own spiritual and intellectual journey. I'd like to share a bit about that and then I'll close.

I first met Robin in 2015 after we moved to Coeur d'Alene, Idaho, to be near my husband's mother. Robin quickly hit it off with my husband, Fr. John, who is a Russian Orthodox priest, a psychotherapist, behavioral consultant, cardio biofeedback trainer, and international speaker. Fr. John and Robin would spend hours exploring the interface between religion and science, especially comparing recent discoveries about cardiac health with ancient Christian spiritual texts. Robin and I also got on well together, with our mutual interest in cooking, health, and essential oils. We enjoyed sharing recipes together, and a number of times Robin let me taste some delicious soups and stews he had cooked.

Up until then, Robin's interest in behavioral health had been highly influenced by the Cognitive Behavioral model. Through his discussions with Fr. John, Robin came to have a fuller understanding of the role of the heart in spiritual wholeness, as well as the complex and sometimes messy world of human emotions. I remember one day when Robin had been to our house he asked to borrow all the books we had ever written, hungry to learn more about the interface between spirituality and emotional health.

Many of the themes of this book emerged out of Robin's conversations with Fr. John. My husband and I were privileged to be the first to read drafts of early chapters of this manuscript. What initially struck me was how practical the book is, as Robin draws from the real life experiences of ordinary men and women.

I know you will glean great insights as you enjoy reading Robin's very well-written *How to Experience the Good Life...Even When Everything Is Going Wrong*:

Introduction

Ruth is a friend of mine who is suffering from cystic fibrosis. She is gradually losing her ability to breathe as her lungs become filled with fluid. When she was twenty-eight years old, Ruth shared on Instagram that one of her hardest struggles is not being able to feel useful. She went on to explain that when she is so worn out that she has to be back in bed by 5:00 pm, and when her body is so weak that she can't even take off her own jeans without help, it's easy to start thinking her life isn't productive, even that it lacks value.¹

Few of us struggle with a chronic disability like cystic fibrosis, but I'm guessing we can all relate to Ruth's internal struggle. Ask yourself this question: *how many times have you measured your own value and self-worth by how much you're able to get done, or by other external measures such as what other people think of you?*

The problem with assessing our worth by external measures is that we always fall short. We may always feel an inner void that comes from never having accomplished enough, or never having merited enough approval from others.

Sometimes the Lord lets us come to the end of our own resources precisely so that we can slow down and realize *it's okay to be me; it's okay to be limited; it's even okay to be weak and vulnerable*. Not only are these conditions okay, but they are precisely the things God uses to accomplish his redemptive purposes in and through us. It is in our weakness that God's love, power, and promises can begin being manifest within us. This brings us back to my friend Ruth and the rest of what she shared on Instagram:

It's one of the hardest lessons God is teaching me through CF: His view of useful and worthwhile is different to my own. He's given me a body that needs a lot of rest and can't do a lot of 'normal' things and yet all His promises count for me as well. I'm tempted to think that I can be worthwhile despite my weakness, yet He tells me I can be worthwhile even in my weakest moments. How? Because His power is made perfect in weakness.

It's more obvious to me than most - I can't live life by myself. I mean, half the time I can't even get my own jeans off at the end of the day. Being weak makes me see my need. And when I see my need, He is there to fill it. Father, Saviour, Breath-giver. Comforter. Protector. Burden-bearer.

Ruth's life is not enviable and yet she has reached a stage of the Good Life most of us never attain. The reality she describes—utter and complete reliance on God in the face of weakness—is a reality we

can all experience, even without a debilitating illness. Although Christ is always there to carry our burdens, to protect and comfort us, we often don't fully understand this until we experience periods of suffering. Sometimes the Lord allows moments, seasons, or even lifetimes of weakness, vulnerability and pain precisely so that we stop depending on ourselves and turn to Him. Through the crosses of our life, the Lord teaches us that our value is not based on how productive we are, how popular we are, how pretty or handsome we are, or how useful we are to others. Rather, each one of us has value based on who we are as a unique creation of God.

Pain is never okay. However, the message of the cross is that pain can be transformative. Through the crosses of our life, the Lord shows us that He can work something beautiful out of our pain and brokenness. As the Jewish Catholic writer Léon Bloy (1846–1917) beautifully commented, “Man has places in his heart which do not yet exist, and into them enters suffering in order that they may have existence.”ⁱⁱⁱ

I never fully understood this principle until 2016 when I was exposed to an ancient Japanese art form known as *Kintsugi*. *Kintsugi* is the art of repairing broken pottery with a material mixed with powdered gold or silver. Unlike other repair methods that attempt to disguise the cracks in broken pottery, *Kintsugi* illuminates the cracks, embracing the brokenness as part of the object's history. When broken pottery is subjected to this technique, it actually becomes more beautiful than pottery that was never shattered in the first place.

Often our lives are like that. As much as we might wish for God to heal us, to remove our brokenness, or to fix the circumstances that cause us grief, He sometimes does something far better: He picks up the broken things of our lives and transforms them into something beautiful.

When we find ourselves facing sorrow, confusion, loneliness, vulnerability and heartache, it takes a lot of child-like faith to believe the Master Artist is beautifying the breaks and shatterings of our life. It is often easier to expect God to offer a “silver-bullet” solution that will eradicate the effects of brokenness from our lives. It takes a lot of faith to believe that the Lord is using us, not in spite of the brokenness, but precisely because of it.

There are no end of self-help books that offer the allure of silver-bullet solutions to our problems. Some of these materials offer an escapist path to wellbeing on the principle that the pain we are feeling isn't really that bad after all. Other materials encourage people to live in a state of denial, as if we can feel better simply by affirming that everything is fine. Still other materials offer the false hope that by following a set of techniques you can realize your dreams and find fulfilment. Our entitlement culture offers very little to comfort those unable to realize their dreams or who find themselves confronted with the fragility and brokenness that is part of the experience of being human.

I wrote this book for the person who has grown tired of these artificial approaches. I wrote this book to show that it is possible to live the Good Life in the midst of the pain, messiness, and frailty of real life.

This book grew out of my own struggles with these important questions. While researching for my earlier book, *Saints and Scoundrels* (2011), I became fascinated by the figure of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a Lutheran pastor who lost his life in the struggle against Hitler.ⁱⁱⁱ My father had introduced me to Bonhoeffer years earlier while he was working on his WWII novel, *The Eleventh Hour* (1993).^{iv} After returning from Germany on a research trip, he acquired an extensive library of Bonhoeffer's books. While researching for *Saints and Scoundrels*, I asked my father if I could borrow his Bonhoeffer library. As I began devouring Bonhoeffer's corpus, I was intrigued by his continual attitude of gratefulness. How is it, I wondered, that Bonhoeffer could be so thankful to God in the midst of war, hardship and imprisonment? By contrast, those of us living in safety and comfort find things to grumble and complain about every day. Bonhoeffer's life raised the same question as the example of my friend Ruth, a woman of great inner peace and contentment despite a level of outward suffering that few of us can comprehend. What was their secret? I suspected the answer had something to do with attitude in general, and an attitude of gratefulness in particular.

From 2012 to 2017 I took a job helping would-be psychologists pass the licensure exam. Working in the psychology industry gave me the opportunity to delve deeper into the cognitive, psychological, and physiological benefits of gratitude. Encouraged by a body of empirical research showing that gratitude can mitigate the impact of negative emotions, I began promoting gratitude as a powerful instrument for relieving suffering, preventing sadness, and increasing happiness.

But still, something was missing from my perspective. I tended to treat gratitude like a happiness pill people could apply whenever they got the blues. It was almost as if I imagined gratitude offered us a tool for thinking ourselves out of pain. Although I still believe that gratitude and correct thinking have enormous power to make us more resilient to life's difficulties (Chapters 3, 6 & 7), the problem is that I was still envisioning the Good Life in terms of personal happiness.

The Lord used a particularly difficult set of circumstances to force me to rethink this happiness-based vision of the Good Life. In the summer of 2015, I got news that my PhD dissertation had been rejected. This blow coincided with a number of other crushing events, all of which put my professional, personal, and financial life into a state of freefall. As a result, I found myself facing high levels of confusion, sorrow, and pain.

In the midst of these difficulties, I returned to some of the lessons I had learned from Bonhoeffer. I also began reading some of the devotional literature written by the early Church Fathers and discussing these texts with different pastors, scholars, psychologists, monks, seminary professors and clergy. Through these books and conversations, I began to catch a glimpse of a much fuller orientation towards the Good Life. It comes back to the principle of *kintsugi*: God wants to reach us in our suffering as well as in our joy, in our negative moments as well as our positive. And even when life is so difficult that we don't have the energy to count our blessings, the Lord is still there to meet us in our fragility and pain. My friend Ruth once described this by using the language of "bright sadness", adding that

“it’s OK to be sad and find things difficult. We like to fix people and make them happy again. But life isn’t like that.”^v

Gradually, I began to see that God wanted to meet you and me right where we are, in the messiness and brokenness of the present moment. I began to understand the message found in so many of the Psalms, namely that vulnerability and weakness play an integral part of the beautiful story God is writing in our lives. Elder Alexander of Gethsemane captured this mystery when he commented that, “The amount of suffering that the soul can accommodate is also how much it can accommodate the grace of God.”^{vi}

The vision of the good life that began to emerge from these studies was much more complex than what I had previously understood. It also involved numerous paradoxes. I came to see that the good life is about finding a type of joy that only comes when we give up the pursuit of happiness and pursue meaning instead (chapter 1). The good life is about learning to be grateful in the midst of life’s problems (chapters 3 & 7), but it is also about learning to be present with God when we are too distressed to see past those problems (chapters 8 and 9). The good life is about improving our life through baby steps and good habits (chapter 10 & Appendix A)—including making incremental strides to increase attentiveness (chapter 4) and right thinking patterns (chapter 6 & 7)— but it is also about learning to simply accept ourselves for who we are right now (chapter 2). The good life is about being able to look after our needs with proper self-care (chapter 2 & 9), but it is also about learning to forget about ourselves and live for others (chapter 11). The good life is about learning to get in touch with our feelings (chapter 5) but it is also about learning to see our feelings in perspective and not get swept away by them (chapters 6 & 7). The good life is about serving God by being weak for Him instead of being strong, through being poor rather than rich, and by attempting small things for Him instead of great things (chapters 5, 8 & 9). Above all, the Good Life is about gratefully allowing God meet us exactly where we are, in the messiness, brokenness, and pain of the present moment. Sometimes we need to commit the ultimate heresy of our feel-good culture and actually *lean into* the pain we would rather be struggling against (chapters 5, 8, 9 & 12).

Finally, a disclaimer may be helpful, especially for my Orthodox Christian readers. In 2013, my family left the Protestant evangelical church we had been attending to join an Eastern Orthodox congregation. The spirituality and theology we encountered in Orthodoxy, rooted in ancient expressions of Christian piety, resonated with something deep within us. At the time of this transition, I was writing for clients about “secular” matters while occasionally writing Christian material for outlets like the Colson Center and *Touchstone Magazine*. After our move to Orthodoxy, well-meaning church friends were disappointed that I was not writing directly about Eastern Orthodox Christianity. When I did make occasional forays into Orthodox theology with the blessing of my priest, I received push-back from critics on the other side, who were concerned that I was allegedly setting myself as a teacher. “Stay in your lane and write about matters of this world,” they said, “and leave others to write

about the faith.” My own inclinations generally aligned with these critics, since I have always considered myself a baby in the faith, a spiritual seeker rather than someone with sufficient wisdom and maturity to confidently venture into theological waters. Accordingly, when I began the present book, I originally intended to simply address issues of psychology and neuroscience without reference to my Christian faith. Yet I quickly found that it was impossible to address any of these issues, let alone questions about suffering and the Good Life, independently of a theological reference point. One reason for this is that all truth—even the truth we misleadingly refer to as “secular”—finds its legitimacy in Jesus Christ; consequently, if we delve deep in any field of human knowledge, including those fields that are ostensible non-religious, we will necessarily find them intersecting with theology. As various thinkers from Alexander Schmemmann to John Milbank have shown, the concept of the “secular” as a free-standing realm where questions can be discussed independent of religion, is a comparatively modern invention lacking coherence. For these and other reasons, I found it increasingly difficult to conceal the theological reference points of my thinking. But while the final product is unabashedly theological, I would caution my readers against looking to me as an authority on the faith. This, finally, is the disclaimer I promised at the beginning of this paragraph. I am neither a theologian nor a spiritual teacher. Rather, I am simply a fellow student passing on what I have learned from men and women much more advanced in the faith than me. All the spiritual teaching in this work is either derivative from the Church Fathers or from teachings I have been blessed to receive from the clergy in my life. At the same time, please be assured that any errors are entirely my own.

Finally, I want to thank those clergy and seminary professors who have been involved in offering a “theological audit” of this work or portions thereof, especially Bishop John, Fr. Basil Caldaroni, Fr. John Calbom, Deacon Joseph Mannion, Dr. David C. Ford, Rev. Dn. Stephen Muse, PhD, to name only some of the individuals who have been involved. I also want to thank *Touchstone Magazine* for letting me reuse material that first appeared in the March/April 2017 edition, from my article “The Cross of Least Resistance: Our Path to Holiness Runs Straight Through Calvary.” I would also like to thank St. Sebastian Orthodox Press for allowing me to reuse material that appeared in my chapter “Gratitude in the Midst of Suffering,” from *Pain, Suffering and Resilience: Orthodox Christian Perspectives* (2018). I also want to thank my agent Bruce Barbour of Literary Management Group for patiently working with me on this project. Perhaps the biggest Thank You of all goes to my parents for serving as benefactors for much of the research that went into this book. Finally, I want to thank my family and friends, especially my wife Esther, for being patient interlocutors with me in exploring these ideas.

ⁱ Between the time when this manuscript was completed but before the process of publication began, Ruth was able to receive a lung transplant. Thus, through the enormous kindness of God, she is now doing very well and is in good health. I have preserved all references to Ruth’s condition as they appeared in my original text, without adding qualifications about her recent recovery.

ⁱⁱ Léon Bloy, cited in Graham Greene, *The End of the Affair* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 1951), 6.

ⁱⁱⁱ Robin Phillips, *Saints and Scoundrels* (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2011).

^{iv} Michael R Phillips, *The Eleventh Hour: The Secret of the Rose # 1* (Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House, 1993).

^v Sharon Barnard, "Living With a Life-Limiting Illness," *Woman Alive*, March 13, 2018, <https://www.womanalive.co.uk/stories/view?articleid=2780>.

^{vi} Elder Alexander of Gethsemane, cited in Stephen Muse, James Burg, and Halina Woroncow, eds., *Pain, Suffering and Resilience: Orthodox Christian Perspectives* (Alhambra, CA: St. Sebastian Orthodox Press, 2018), 11.