

NOTHING BETTER

Five Gifts for Living When Control Fails

Lukas Naugle

The Essay

We will all lose all we love.

Six years. That's how long my wife, Gretchen, lived with breast cancer.

Most of those years had a rhythm in the afternoons. The kids would come home from school and she would be on the couch, sometimes upright, sometimes not, depending on how the chemo was that week. She would ask each of them about the day. She wanted to know who had said what at lunch. She did this when she was so tired she could not stand without help, and she smiled at the answers, and the day would gather itself around her smile until it was almost an ordinary afternoon. I have a lot of memories from those years. That is the one I keep coming back to.

After she died, the mornings turned into long walks. A six-mile loop through the Park Cities in Dallas: front door, down University, through the SMU campus, onto the Katy Trail, and back along Armstrong. The world was carrying on. The loop carried me through it without asking me to be part of it.

The question came on the walks. Not the question people asked me. People asked, how are you. People asked, are you sleeping. The question was: how do you build a life after everything you built has been swept away.

I read what people read, the good books on grief and resilience, and the question was still there when I closed them. Wisdom may keep you safe, but it won't keep you warm. It would not sit beside me on the couch in the evening. It would not make a meal worth lingering over. I needed a wisdom with hands, with a chair, with bread on it, with enough room for grief and ordinary laughter in the same hour.

So I went back to a book I had read many times before, and I started reading it differently.

The book is Ecclesiastes, written more than two thousand years ago by a writer who calls himself the Preacher. I'm a Christian, and for me it is a sacred book. I want to say that plainly, because what follows grows out of a particular text from a particular tradition. But Ecclesiastes is not only a Christian book. It is an ancient Hebrew text, still read aloud in synagogues every year at Sukkot, and spiritual people of many kinds have found a great deal in it. It bothers church people, religious people and spiritual people alike. You don't have to share my source to find what follows useful. It is for anyone who eats, works, loves, and will one day die.

What Ecclesiastes does, read after a loss, is name the conditions of life so accurately that you stop arguing with them. Life is brief. The world goes on whether you do or not. Wisdom will help you, and wisdom will fail you. There is only one life, and you do not get to step outside it to check whether it is going well.

And then, in the middle of that hard honesty, the writer interrupts himself. He tells you to eat and drink. He tells you to be joyful and to do good while you live. “I commend joy,” he writes, “for man has nothing better under the sun but to eat and drink and be joyful” (Ecclesiastes 8:15).

Out of those passages came a framework. It is small, and the smallness is the point. When your life has come apart, the enormous answer is more than you can carry. But bread is not too heavy. A walk is not too heavy. A chair at a table, a small good task, an honest gift, choosing joy for one more day: these are small enough to pick up. They are also, the Preacher insists, large enough to live by. There is, he says, nothing better.

ETERNITY IN THE HEART

There is a moment most people have, usually around a dinner table, when they look at the people they love and time seems to stand still. You think ahead to the years when some of these people will not be at the table, and the years when you will not be at the table. Nothing is wrong. But the moment is suddenly very large, because you can see that it is passing.

The moment passes. Somebody asks for the salt. But you leave it knowing that all of this is passing and that it is precious, and you enjoy the people at the table more for knowing it. The Preacher of Ecclesiastes has a name for what breaks through in those moments.

He has put eternity into man's heart, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end. (Ecclesiastes 3:11)

Two claims sit together in that sentence uncomfortably. The first is that there is something in you sized for eternity, a hunger that will not be filled by ordinary things, even the very good ordinary things. The second is that you cannot get there. You can see pieces. You cannot see the whole. The hunger is real. So is the limit.

You can deny the first half and call the hunger a glitch. You can deny the second half and say you have the system solved, which is the religious version of the same move. Or you can let the verse stand and learn to live inside it, and the living is the good part.

The writer of Ecclesiastes lives inside it, and from there he does something startling, again and again. He has been describing the brevity and the unfairness of things. Then he stops and tells you what to do. Eat and drink and find enjoyment in your work. Be joyful and do good while you live. The stance is not denial and it is not solving. It is receiving. Nobody can be commanded into a feeling. Anyone can be commanded to turn toward a table and sit down.

THE THREE LONGINGS

Picture a man who spent seven years building a small business, then sold it for a number that meant his children would be fine. More than one man I know is some version of him. Six months later you would expect him to be radiant. He has the thing he had worked toward since his twenties, and he is trying to decide what to do with his afternoon. The worst thing, he will tell you, is the absence of the next thing.

The hunger Ecclesiastes calls eternity in the heart is not a single feeling. It is three hungers running through every life, trading places at different ages. I call them the three longings, and each one is a quest. A quest is not a goal. A goal sits still and waits to be reached. A quest moves toward a horizon that recedes the closer you get.

The Infinite is the longing for possibility. The next horizon, the next thing. The entrepreneur looking at a market and seeing what is not there yet; the teenager driving with the windows down on a summer night. Its fear is the fear of getting stuck: the closed door, the road narrowing at fifty without your noticing. That longing is what made him build his business. What kept him awake after the sale was that he had finished, and there was no next horizon yet.

The Indelible is the longing for permanence. To leave a mark, to build something still standing after you are not, to be loved in a way that does not end. The parent writing a letter to be opened on a wedding day twenty years away; the old man standing a long time at his wife's grave without speaking. Its fear is the fear of loss. Of being forgotten.

The Ideal is the longing for perfection. An architect spends three years trying to make a real building match the one she drew. A parent goes to bed short of the parent the kid deserves. Its fear is the fear of falling short, that the gap between who you are and who you should be is not closing.

When our hopes and desires feel threatened, we get anxious and afraid, because we realize how much is not in our control. A person with no fear of loss does not love very deeply. Dealing with our fears is the cost of being made for more.

Everything that follows turns on one sentence. That ache is not a curse. It is a gift. If you had been made without the longing, you would settle for less than you were made for. If you had been made without the limit, you would mistake yourself for God. The Preacher offers a way of living between those two truths. He calls it joy.

VAPOR

Come into the kitchen at 6 a.m. on a cold morning in November and make coffee. The kitchen is dark except for the small light over the stove. Stand at the window and watch the steam come off the cup. It is there. Then it is less there. Then you cannot see it anymore. Your breath does the same thing on the other side of the glass.

That is the word. The Hebrew word Ecclesiastes uses for almost everything is “hevel.” Vanity, in the old translations. Vapor is closer. Steam off a cup. Breath on a window. It appears almost forty times in twelve chapters, and it doesn't mean nothing matters. It means life is short and cannot be held.

Vapor is real. You can see it and feel it on your face. But you cannot save it for later. A child's birthday party. A first kiss. A run of good health. The smell of your grandmother's house. You will not get any of these back. Vapor is what they always were.

Most people do one of two things with that. They deny it or they distract themselves from it. Denial is the industry of productivity and optimization, life managed as if it were a project that

could be completed. Distraction is the other industry: the endless feed, the evening that disappears between dinner and bed. Both fail the same way. The vapor is not deceived. It waits, and it shows up at the diagnosis, at the funeral, at the birthday with the zero in it, and the people who spent decades not looking meet it with no practice.

The writer of Ecclesiastes did neither. He took the vapor seriously and then he did something nobody expects. He recommended joy. He has spent his whole book taking consolations away: legacy will not save you, wealth will not save you, wisdom will only get you so far. A reader braces for stoicism. And the conclusion is eat your bread with joy. It lands like a joke at a funeral, and it is meant to. When nothing can be held, holding was never the assignment. Receiving was.

There is a word for what he recommended, and it does not get used much in religious writing. The word is play. I don't mean only games, although it includes them. I mean a way of living, a way of moving through the world once you have stopped trying to control it, ready for whatever comes. A person at play has buried the people they have buried and is living with their hands open anyway. The opposite of play is not work. It's the white-knuckle grip: grasping for ever more control. And the grip holds nothing anyway.

David Gibson calls this the central move of the whole book. Life, he writes, is gift, not gain. I want to take his phrase one step further. Receive life as gift, not guarantee. The gift is real. The guarantee is not coming. There is only the cup that is in front of you, and the choice of whether to drink it.

HOW WE SEE

There is a kitchen I have walked into a thousand times. The other day, after a hard week, I noticed something I had never noticed: a series of small dents in the refrigerator door, golf-ball sized, a foot from the bottom. They have been there for years. The dents had not changed. I had not changed. Only my attention had changed.

What you can see depends on how you are looking. The psychiatrist Iain McGilchrist puts it this way: "The kind of attention we pay actually alters the world: we are, literally, partners in creation."

So before the gifts, four lenses on the same moment. The Material lens attends to the things you shape and steward: the objects in your house, the tools in your hand, the money and where it goes. The Physical lens attends to how you live in your body and in time: whether you slept, whether you have been outside, the ache in your back. The Relational lens attends to the people you live among, seen as people and not as roles. The Emotional lens attends to what you feel and carry: grief sitting on your chest, the joy that surprised you on Tuesday. Most people live in one and let the others go dark, because whatever your work rewards is the lens that gets exercise.

It is a Saturday morning and you are washing dishes from last night's dinner with friends. The Material lens notices the platter that was a wedding present and the chip on the blue bowl. The Physical lens notices the hot water over your hands. The Relational lens replays the table: who told the story that made everyone laugh, which friend seemed quieter than usual. The Emotional

lens catches a contentment with a thread of melancholy in it, because the evening was good and good evenings end. One sink of dishes. Four ways of being present to it. The moment did not change. The amount of it you received did.

An unseen gift stays wrapped. That is the whole reason the lenses come before the gifts.

FEAST WITH FRIENDS

Picture a fire at a friend's place, somewhere with no neighbors and no cell signal. Eight or nine people on folding chairs and a couple of logs. Hot dogs. Wine in plastic cups. They sit there for hours. The kids stay up later than they should. Somebody tells a story everyone has heard before, and they listen to it like it is new, because the telling is the point, not the story.

Go, eat your bread with joy, the Preacher says, and drink your wine with a merry heart, for God has already approved what you do (Ecclesiastes 9:7). A feast can be a dinner party, a holiday, or twenty minutes over takeout at the kitchen counter. What makes it a feast is four things present in the people at the table: relationship, abundance, hospitality, belonging. The food can be simple. Soup will do. The people have to be people you do not have to perform for. Time helps, and the clock is not the gate. The feast is the stretch when everyone at the table is all there.

Being all there is the part that scares us. A meal you are all at has room in it for the second question, the one that gets at how you actually are, and a full calendar suits a person who would rather not be found out.

Every feast is a protest against despair. The world is hard, and you sit down at a table anyway. You light the candles anyway. The room becomes its own room, and inside it the news cannot reach you. It does not solve anything. But for the time you were at the table, the despair did not have you. The table won.

If you have not built a small handful of people you can call about dinner, that is the first work. Pick a time and keep it. Keep the menu beneath your ambitions. Keep it through the awkward first attempts, and by the eighth or ninth week the guests walk in without knocking and open the refrigerator. Meaning is shared at the table.

DO SOME GOOD

Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might, for there is no work or thought or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol, to which you are going (Ecclesiastes 9:10). The word that does the work is whatever. Not the right thing. Not the thing you have been called to. Whatever.

The CEO and the receptionist have the same instruction. It is aimed at the hand and not the resume, because the hand does not know the difference between important work and small work. It only knows whether it is working with might or working while looking over its own shoulder. The rank was always the audience's concern. The might was always yours.

Work is your portion. Not your identity. Not your proof. A portion is what is set out in front of you; you did not pick the menu. This sounds like a demotion. It is a relief. A bad quarter

becomes a bad quarter, not a verdict on your soul. A portion, unlike a proof, can be set down at 6 p.m. The fear was never fuel. It was drag dressed as fuel.

Set beside that the woman who cleans rooms at a hotel off the interstate. The work is repetitive and underpaid, and no sentence here makes it otherwise. She does it well anyway, the corners squared, the vents wiped, because the work is hers, today's portion. She is not secretly fulfilled. That is the version of good work this refuses to prettify, and it is closer to the Preacher's meaning than any calling discovered at a retreat.

Do what you do, then, the way you would throw a piece of bread into a moving river. Cast your bread upon the waters, for you will find it after many days (Ecclesiastes 11:1). Most of the work that shaped your life was done by people who never knew you. Most of yours will reach people you will never meet.

Notice where the joy lives. Not in the result. Not in the praise. The joy is in the doing. Watch what you do in the last minute of a task. The person still working for the result looks up and begins composing the announcement. The person who has found the joy in the doing lingers a second with the thing itself, the way a carpenter runs a thumb along a sanded edge nobody will ever look at. The thumb is not checking for approval. The thumb is enjoying the edge.

Burn your calories for good. Your hands. Your hours. The day in front of you.

ENJOY YOUR PARTNER

Enjoy life with the wife whom you love, all the days of your vain life that he has given you under the sun (Ecclesiastes 9:9). The verb is enjoy. It's the word you'd use about a good meal. Enjoyment requires presence, and you cannot enjoy someone you have stopped seeing.

The verse points at a covenant of joy between two people who chose each other, a friendship unlike any other: every kind of friendship in one relationship. Lose sight of that and the household runs on duty and habit until one of you wakes up and realizes there is no joy left in the house.

What dims the enjoyment is not the dramatic things. Enjoyment in a marriage usually fades from three small things: running it like a to-do list, only half paying attention, and keeping score. The to-do list is the endless logistics of who is taking which kid where. Half attention is the phone first at the breakfast table, work following you home, and the marriage getting whatever attention is left. Keeping score is the small accounts kept, the thing said three weeks ago still held against the other person. The repair is usually one honest sentence, said the same week.

The practice lives in small things. Asking the question and waiting for the answer. Not the logistics question. Tell me one thing about today that I would not have known. The touch that is not asking for anything. None of these require advice. All of them require attention. After twenty years there is still something you don't know about the person across the table, and finding it out is one of the joys of a long marriage.

If you are not married, whatever the reason, this gift is still yours. Marriage is a friendship unlike any other, but it is not the only one, and friendship is open to everyone. Becoming a good friend, the kind of person a long friendship is built with, is something we can always work toward.

Build a whole life together, and enjoy each other in the building. The building looks like ordinary work: a meal cooked together, a trip taken, a tradition that started ten years ago and is now just what your family does. This is your best friend, not a contract you're stuck with.

SHARE YOUR STUFF

You know the feeling before guests arrive. Whether to bring out the good towels, or not, because the good towels might get used. The wine you actually like versus the bottle that is fine if someone finishes it. The new candle tucked in a drawer because you were saving it for something.

You know the other version too. The house you walk into and immediately relax. The friend who opens the refrigerator and says take whatever you want. Both houses belong to real people. Sometimes to the same person. The question is which one you actually live in.

Everyone also to whom God has given wealth and possessions and power to enjoy them, the verse says, this is the gift of God (Ecclesiastes 5:19). There are two halves to that and most readers see only one. Having is one gift. The power to enjoy is a separate gift. You can have without enjoying, and the gap between the two is where most of us live.

What blocks the enjoyment is fear. Fear that what you have is not enough, that if you let it go more won't come, that you might need it later. The fear usually shows up as sensible math. Ask yourself: how much would be enough? If the answer has moved every time you reached it, the math was never the issue. Enough is not a number.

When we share, we break fear's control. You cannot reason your way out of fear; you can only act in a direction it says you should not. The first time you give something away that you were afraid to give, the fear loses a small share of you.

An open hand holds more. Inventory is deceptive; use is honest. You do not know whether the guest room is hospitality or storage until someone sleeps in it. And the stuff is wider than money. Time, which lands harder than a check when it is given. Skill, the most hoarded stuff in modern life, because we bill for it. And hospitality, the house itself, offered instead of defended.

What you have is not a reward; it's a gift. And gifts are meant to be shared. Give freely, not to prove virtue, but because joy is found in using your strength for others' good.

OPT FOR JOY

Gretchen did not love being photographed, and as the cancer and the chemotherapy worked on her body she liked it less. But the photographs we have from those six years are mostly of her smiling. Not the polite smile. The real one. It is the face of a person who has been told she does

not have much time left and has decided what to do about it. The decision is on her face. It is a small and absolute thing.

And I commend joy, for man has nothing better under the sun but to eat and drink and be joyful, for this will go with him in his toil through the days of his life that God has given him under the sun. (Ecclesiastes 8:15)

Ecclesiastes names four gifts in particular places. Then it simply says, I commend joy. This one has no place of its own. It goes with you into all the others: in whatever you're facing, choose joy. Choose it not because life is easy, but because it is short.

It matters where in his book the Preacher says this. Chapter eight is not a sunny chapter; he has just been writing about wicked men praised in the very city where they did their damage. The commendation arrives inside that catalog, not after it has been resolved. A joy that needs good news is a mood.

There are two ways to miss joy: waiting until life is just right, and faking it when it isn't. Waiting looks like the right job, the right house, the right amount in the bank, and by the time the conditions are right the years have passed. Faking it looks like the vacation photo taken four times until everyone's smile held. The first tries to control your circumstances; the second, how things look.

Real joy lives between them, and it is also the choice to feel what you actually feel without that being the end of the story. Joy and sorrow can come in the same minute: a laugh at a memory, then tears for the person in it, and both are true. Joy that cannot hold grief is not joy. It is just denial wearing a smile.

Most days it does not look dramatic. Whatever you're facing, there is a small choice with more joy in it: lunch away from the desk, the long way home, ten minutes outside between meetings.

I went through all of the photographs from those six years once, looking for the evidence that what I remembered was true. Memory had not softened it. There is one taken about a week before she died. She was in full liver failure. She knew she was dying. She is smiling, and the smile is not brave or staged or trying to comfort anyone. It is just hers. It is the smile of a person who decided, a long time before that week, that she would choose joy, and who kept choosing it even on the day she could not stand without help.

That is what I mean by joy as a direction. By the time you are dying, the direction is who you are, and the smile arrives on its own.

Choose joy, and keep choosing it. A ship does not move in straight lines. The wind shifts, the current pulls, and the corrections are how the ship arrives. Judge the direction by the decade, not the day.

THE RHYTHM OF PLAY

Picture an ordinary Saturday. Work in the morning on the thing you had been putting off, and the hard part done by noon. Lunch on a friend's porch, and an hour helping him move a piece of

furniture. A late afternoon with the person you are married to, talking about nothing in particular. Friends at dinner, and the table held a long time.

Nobody plans a day like that. It arrives. What you notice the next morning is that all five gifts were in it. Most of us have had a day with all the same things in it and missed all of it, running a meeting in our heads that had not happened yet. The friend, the table and the people you love can be right in front of you, and enjoying them still takes your attention. Attention can be practiced.

The five gifts are not a checklist. They are a rhythm. A checklist is what you would make if the gifts were tasks. Did we feast this week? Check. Turn the gifts into boxes to tick and you are back at the desk, grading your own week. The gifts are never assignments. Some weeks lean on one gift more than the others, and that is fine. A hospital week wipes out every box, and the checklist reads that week as failure. A rhythm can skip a beat and keep going.

The gifts are connected, and each one strengthens the others. You can see it in a single loaf of bread on the dinner table. It was bought with money the work earned. Slicing it is a small good done with the hands. Passing it to the person on your left is sharing your stuff. The person on your left, some nights, is the partner you chose and keep choosing. And whether the bread tastes like joy or like carbohydrates depends on whether the eater has chosen joy. The Preacher puts it in six words: eat your bread with joy (9:7).

What ties them together is play. Play is joy practiced. It is joy in motion. A person at play does the work without the work owning them, sits at the table without managing the dinner, loves the partner without trying to fix the partner. The first time you choose joy, the choice is hard. The thousandth time, the choice is the person you have become.

There is a five-word version I use on hard days, and it fits on one hand. Feast. Work. Love. Give. Rejoice. Count them, and notice what you already have in hand. Then ask which one is missing and which is within reach today. Reach for that one.

When you are thirsty, there is nothing better than water. When you are bewildered, there is nothing better than life's simple gifts. Life will not be controllable. Inside that fact, there are five things you can do today that will make the day worth what it costs you.

You do not need to wait for a better life. Receive the one in front of you. The people at your table are the ones you have. The work in your hands is what you were given.

Drink deeply of what is yours.