

PULLING YOUR RATS FROM THE RACE

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Just when you thought
you were winning the rat
race, along come faster
rats.

—Barbara Johnson¹

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It's no accident you're holding this book in your hands right now. Do you think it's just a coincidence? Sure, you may have been drawn by the snazzy cover and catchy title, but understand this: there is no mistake here. Your life is pretty chaotic right now, isn't it? You are busier than you've ever been, and you know it. You just don't know what to do about it.

We aren't much different, you and me. Not long ago, I was in the bookstore searching for something—anything—to help me get a grip on my chaotic, topsy-turvy life. I couldn't swing my purse without hitting a book for busy moms. *The Busy Mom's Recipe Book*—*You Can Make a Fourteen Course Meal in Eight Minutes!* *The Busy Mom's 4.2-Second Devotional Book*, *How to Change a Flat Tire for Busy Moms*. Sure, there were lots of books that spoke specifically to me, a busy mom. Unfortunately, they all seemed to accept the fact that I was too busy, and I was going to stay too busy.

I needed help from someone who had walked a mile in my tired, worn-out mommy-shoes. Were there survivors in a head-on collision with busyness? Had anyone been declared victor after jousting the insanity of overactivity?

Why was my life moving faster and becoming more difficult? Slow and easy, that's what I wanted. I looked everywhere for it. I found television shows that explained simple ways to decorate my home for Christmas, simple ways to make a delicious pot roast, simple solutions for annoying pet odors, but where were simple solutions for slowing down? How could I get back some of the time that was being stolen? I even bought a magazine with the word *simple* in the title, thinking surely it would have the answer, only to discover that anything I did, no matter how simple, really wasn't. Slowing down was easier said than done.

We were barely hanging on; our family schedules were crazy. I was a daytime zombie in a minivan, shuttling children back and forth from soccer practice to dance lessons and from Girl Scouts to baseball games. My life was a miserable treadmill, and I was running hard and fast. I was out of breath and exhausted, and getting absolutely nowhere.

Each day I was given another twenty-four hours, and each night I couldn't have told you where all the time had gone. As a family, we were doing more than we ever had before, but we were accomplishing much less, and growing farther apart in the process. It was discouraging. A voice in my head screamed, *This isn't what I signed up for!* Busyness was our new normal, and it was time for a change. The solution I received surprised me, and I had no idea it would be considered radical.

Radical. It's a dirty word to some, and most often used in the context of an insult. The definition means to be *excessive, extreme*, and—my favorite—*revolutionary*. If I were to ask you to think of someone radical, who comes to mind? A person in the United States military might imagine a member of the Taliban. An avid hunter sees a vegetarian. A teenager would, no doubt, envision overprotective parents, and those same parents would see their doesn't-think-things-through adolescent. All are living outside of what is deemed by society as normal. All, in one way or another, are radical.

But I was ready to do anything, even if it meant I looked radical. Busy mom or not, I was tired of feeling patronized. I was sick of hearing, “This is just the way it is: *moms are busy*.” Well, no kidding! I get that. I’m a mom. I know what it’s like to go years without sleep. Yes, I, too, have thanked Big Bird and Dora the Explorer for babysitting my child for hours on end. I have changed my fair share of stinky diapers while writing out my grocery list and mowing the lawn. I am a mom to four kids. I can carry groceries like a pack mule—with a child on each hip, shopping bags and purse around my neck. I can even serenade my youngest to sleep and still manage to open the front door with my teeth.

This wasn’t the busy I needed help with. That kind of busy can’t really be helped. Little ones are an insane amount of work. There is no book out there that is going to solve that. The busyness I needed help with came as my children got a little bit older. Once they were able to tie their own shoes, make themselves a bowl of cereal, and go potty without my full attention, things didn’t slow down. As a matter of fact, they began to move at warp speed.

I began noticing busyness becoming more accepted among families. I talked with lots of other moms, and we shared our complaints. When I suggested we try to do less, or say *no* more often, the consensus was resignation. They were used to living this way. “That’s just the way it is,” they’d tell me. I was starting to believe them.

Being the magazinaholic that I am, one of my light-bulb moments came while reading one. I had originally thought I was reading an article titled “Keeping Up with the Joneses.” Actually, it was an advertisement for a potato chip. An ad for snacks on-the-go validating the bondage of busyness I was feeling. This is what I read: “Busy parents Lisa and Jeff Jones spend most weeknights shepherding their kids Michael, 13, Jennifer, 6, and Madeline, 9, from school to sports, from sports to music, from music to swimming, which means that for them, healthy, delicious snacks on the go are not just a ‘nice to have’ but essential.”²

Did you notice that second line back there? No, not the part about a potato chip being a healthy snack, which is folly in itself, by the way. These parents shepherded their three children most every weeknight, *after school and homework*, from sports to music, from music to swimming. All in one night! Was this ad really supposed to make me think of snacks on-the-go?

I couldn't get past the insanity this family lived every evening. Nothing was mentioned about that. So, it wasn't just me. It seemed the whole wide world was beginning to accept this craziness as a way of life. It was at this very moment that I began to look at our activity as captivity and our busyness as bondage.

I stopped and really listened to the moms I met at the grocery store. The vast majority of them were overwhelmed and physically exhausted, often from self-induced choices. I have yet to hear a mom tell me, "Wow. This week has been amazing! I am busier than I've ever been, and I just love it!" or "I'm exhausted. I ran from home to work, and then rushed the kids from softball to dance lessons, and boy howdy do I feel great!" The common cry of the mothers I know is a feeling of fatigue, overcommitment, and the helpless inability to make a change. I'm not hearing much joy.

There are four moms I run into on a regular basis at my local grocery store. Which one are you? New Mom? Old Mom? Tired Mom? Blue Mom?

New Mom: My little one was up all night. I think she's teething. Please tell me I'll sleep again before she starts college. I haven't showered in days, and my car has become a U-Haul for a traveling circus of toddlers. Can't talk. I'm running late for Kelsey's newborn gymnastics class.

Old Mom: Busy. Busy. Busy. We are so busy. Taylor made the competition field hockey team. Her games are in Brazil three times a month. Matthew made the varsity football team and has practice eighteen hours a day. It's OK, they're having fun! My husband? I haven't seen him since last Tuesday.

Tired Mom: This mom doesn't have time to chat. She is slumped over her shopping cart, mumbling incoherently with her eyes oddly fixed on some unseen object in the distance. She's wearing her son's college sweatshirt backward and hasn't brushed her hair in days.

Blue Mom: The kids are doing great. We don't see them as much as we'd like, but the grandkids are growing like weeds, so they tell me. No, they couldn't make it for Thanksgiving. Ashley was in a soccer tournament. Bob and I paid to have their family portrait stamped on a few thousand local milk cartons. We finally tracked them down at a basketball game last week. I ran up to hug Jacob and the ref called a foul.

I understand their irritation, bitterness, and exhaustion *completely*. The big difference for me is now I know how to get off that nauseating rollercoaster ride. Changes can be made for the better, and lives can be released from the captivity of activity.

Are you feeling in bondage to your busyness? Are you in captivity to your activity? Or have you been beaten down enough to believe this is just how life is? You need to know something: this isn't just how life is. There is freedom from busyness, because sometimes even the good things in life can become the enemy of the best things in life. I love my children, and I have the bad habit of thinking I can make their world perfect. I run off in twenty different directions to make their lives better, when really, I need to stop and open my eyes to all I'm doing, doing, doing, then ask myself: *will this have any eternal value?* I had an experience as a child that reminds me of how important it is to pay attention and open my eyes.

Open Your Eyes

They say I look just like my dad, but Mom still managed to pass on a few traits to her oldest child: green eyes, a love of reading, and the fear of water. Mom had a fear of water she didn't want her children to experience. When I was eight years old, a creaky wooden gate was my portal into Aylen's Swim School. I can still recall open-

ing it to the coconut scent of Hawaiian Tropic suntan lotion and the sounds of splashing children. Each week I stepped through that door, I might as well have been walking the green mile.

I dreaded swimming lessons.

While I rubbed on sunscreen, my mother and little sisters were gathered together with the other parents in the shade of an overhang to watch the lessons.

"Hurry up, Joanne. Your instructor is already talking with your class." My mom gently pushed me in their direction. I wanted to make her proud. She knew my fear of water, especially the deep end of the pool, so I scurried along.

My pretty, tanned, and fully clothed instructor shared, "Today is a big day. Today you will be jumping into the deep end with your float boards and kicking across the whole length of the pool." She smiled as if this were great news. "I won't be in the pool with you. I know you can do this. That's why I'm not even in my swimsuit today."

When my turn came I reluctantly jumped in, still confused as to why this swimming stuff was enjoyable to anyone. With arms stretched out and hanging on to my float board for dear life, I squeezed my eyes shut tight and kicked my eight-year-old legs as hard as I could. Before I jumped in I had already worked out my strategy. Stay close to the pool wall at any cost. If the deep end was scary, the center of the pool was scariest. There was safety and comfort beside the wall because I knew I could reach up and grab the side if I needed to.

After a little while I thought, *Wow. I sure hope my mom is watching me. I'm doing really great at this.* It was at that moment I heard my instructor's voice.

"Joanne, open your eyes! Look around! See where you are!" she shouted.

Opening my eyes, I looked around and discovered I was in the middle of the deepest part of the pool. My trust in the float board was immediately over, and I went under. My instructor shouted something else to me but it didn't matter, I wasn't listening. In

front of a summer crowd of parents, siblings, and schoolmates, I panicked and began to drown.

My fully clothed swim teacher jumped in to rescue me. I was met at the edge of the pool by my mother who awkwardly tried to hold my baby sister and throw a towel around me at the same time. I was mortified. And I thought I was doing so well.

Just like the scary part of the pool, busyness can creep up in our lives. The moment we think we have a handle on things, we can go under. It's my turn to ask you to take a deep breath and survey your day-to-day life. The words of my swim instructor seem quite fitting as you read through each chapter and discover ways to journey from busy to blessing.

Open your eyes. Look around. See where you are.

Here would be the perfect opportunity to jump into the radical sabbatical part of the story. But, in order for you to truly share our journey from busy to blessing, I have to let you peek behind the curtain of my overwhelmed life. I'll let you in on a little secret: denial is where it all started for me.

I am excited to walk with you through these pages. I encourage you to open your eyes to the possibilities. Remember, there is nothing written here I haven't experienced myself. And, as much as my colorful cover and catchy title may have drawn you to this place, my prayer is you'll finish this book with much more.

Dear Lord, pry open my eyes. I'm afraid they may be closed. As I read each chapter, give me perfect eyesight to see my life clearly, the strength to be honest with myself, and the courage to make radical changes along the way. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

- How busy is your life?
- What did you accomplish today that has eternal value?
- Do you have time for the important things like reading a bedtime story to your little ones, having dinner together as a family, or time alone with your husband?
- If not, why not?

Frustration is not the will of God. There is time to do anything and everything that God wants us to do.

—*Elisabeth Elliot*³