

The Fully Lived Life

Rescuing Our Souls from All that Holds Us Back

by Dr. Merry C. Lin

Life ^{THE} FULLY LIVED

RESCUING
Our SOULS
from ALL
that Holds
Us BACK

“I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.” (John 10:10)

Dr. Merry C. Lin
Clinical Psychologist



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The Fully Lived Life: Rescuing Our Souls from All that Holds Us Back

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Introduction

“Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you’ll recover your life. I’ll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won’t lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you’ll learn to live freely and lightly.”

Matthew 11:28–30, MSG

I had finally had enough.

I woke, and my body refused to get out of bed. After a restless night, I lay there, exhausted and overwhelmed. Head pounding, muscles aching. The sun peered through the blinds heralding the new day, but I wanted to yell at it, *Shut up!* It was mocking me.

That’s when I knew I was losing it.

For 15 years I’d run a busy counselling practice and raised my kids. Every day, I woke to the drumbeat of *go, go, go* pounding in my head as I drove myself to keep going. No time to pause, no time to relax. You ever feel that way?

But I was finally crashing, beaten down by discouragement and a growing depression that squeezed out all rationality. I was an emotional mess; I hated my life and who I’d become. I wasn’t sleeping, I had no energy and I was burned out. Just getting up each morning was like scaling a mountain, and I was no longer finding any joy in anything I did. Spiritually, I’d become as dry as an abandoned well. I’d lost the will to pray long ago, let alone the desire to read my Bible or attend church.

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In this desert, I realized I was trapped, unable to break out of the prison my life had become. I was slowly dying, surrounded by constant demands for my time and drained by others' expectations.

No matter what I did, it was never enough.

Despite knowing I was called to be a hope-bearer for others in despair, I couldn't bear the burden of caring for them in my counselling office any longer. I couldn't hear their painful stories without losing another piece of myself. There was no way I could continue pretending to care as they sought healing from God in the midst of their suffering and personal crises. I was failing myself, my family, my team, my clients, my community and my God.

As bad as I felt then, it wasn't until a time of reflective prayer with two of my trusted friends that I finally broke down completely. I remember the moment as clearly as when it happened. It was the day my headlong tumble into depression and burnout began.

It's been three years since then as I write this, but I can still feel the hard floor on my knees as I hunched sobbing, held tight by my friend. And I can still feel the comfort of my encounter with Jesus that day.

It was during *lectio divina*, as we reflected on the passage in John 5:1–9. Jesus encountered a lame man lying by the pool of Bethesda, waiting 38 years to be healed. This pool of water was purported to have healing qualities when the water was stirred, but the lame man told Jesus he had no one to help him. Others were always jumping in ahead of him.

We imagined ourselves in the scene as the passage was read aloud. I tried to imagine myself lying lame by the pool, but it didn't feel right. So I envisioned myself getting up and helping others into the pool. I knew I was crippled, but I hid it secretly, desperately hurting on the inside as I focused on my task of assisting others in need.

Then Jesus approached me, unspeakable compassion on his face, and asked what I wanted.

In an instant, I fell forward onto my knees and cried out, "*When is it my turn?*"

I began to weep uncontrollably, surrounded by my loving friends who embraced me and cried with me. So deep was my sorrow, I could not stop crying.

Beyond my exhaustion and emotional fatigue, I was crying for the years I had secretly felt abandoned by God, forgotten by others and valued only for what I could do or give to them. I was seen only in the light of how well I was able to meet their demands and needs. I had become an empty shell, and there was a wide

chasm between me and my true identity as a child of God. My sense of worth was dictated by the approval of others, to the point that I'd lost all sight of myself and what my life had become.

Looking back, it wasn't until the Lord took me to the end of myself that I finally had no choice but to let go. Exhausted and hopelessly discouraged, I crashed. But this was a gift, too, because me being so deep in the crippling darkness of depression meant that he could take me on the incredible journey of facing the emptiness within my heart and soul.

And finding him *there* with me in my desert has literally changed my life.

Wherever you are in life right now, I'm sure there have been many unexpected turns along the way. You aren't where you thought you'd be, whatever you first dreamt your life would be—the fairy-tale marriage and family, a highly successful career, a passion for God reaping you the blessings of faithful service. Instead, the realities of your life may be keeping you stuck, unable to break free no matter how hard you pray. I know what it's like to feel completely overwhelmed by life's demands, weary beyond belief and wondering where all your hope has gone.

You may know you're blessed, that you really have a "good life" and are very fortunate, but you may still have lost your joy in it. You go through dreary daily routines, fulfilling your duties to your family, work and God, but your heart is dry. Where is the passion and joy within the unending grey monotony of life? This "good life" you have steals your right to complain, so you "suck it up" and keep trudging along.

We all try to ignore the emptiness of the soul. But the Bible says, "*Deep calls to deep*" (Psalm 42:7). There is something *inescapable* within each of our souls that hungers so painfully that we can't even begin to put it into words, something so deep it won't go away no matter how hard we try. As David said, "*As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, my God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God*" (Psalm 42:1–2, emphasis mine).

We aren't meant to live a dead life. A superficial life. A life oblivious to the stirrings of our hearts. It is only in that mysterious depth of our souls that we sense there's something missing that's core to life; it's a painful awareness that we must finally acknowledge and reach into and find God.

God wants you to meet him in this deep place, in the inner recesses of your heart, to meet him there *face to face*, so he can change your life. He wants to bring you back to life, to know you intimately so that you may know yourself in his love, as he first created you to be. He wants to free you and take over fully because he knows best how you were created to live—completely surrendered to him.

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For then he knows you will experience the extraordinary in your life, the *full life* that is his perfect will for you. A life lived *fully*.

And so, as you begin, I urge you to slow down. Don't whip through this book like an anxious teenager looking for the next thrill, and the next, and the next. *This* is the finish line, the place where you accept God's love and sovereign will over all he's brought to your life. There's not one more thing to check off on your "to-do" list today. Slow down and hear what the Lord wants to say to you here.

In our culture we're living in a pandemic of ignored introspection. Action is valued over reflection, and all too often we rush through life mindlessly, always on to the next thing. And so we don't seem to grow through our hardships, or we find ourselves stuck and don't know why. Such lack of reflectiveness is a formula for a human shipwreck.

Have you been that shipwreck?

Have you ever taken time to get to know the longing inside? Often people are so busy simply surviving life they forget that really *living* requires some downtime reflecting on what they're actually *doing* with their lives. I'm guilty of that all too often. Take just a moment to consider this quick self-assessment.

1 = "Not at all true."

2 = "Sometimes."

3 = "Often."

4 = "Most of the time."

5 = "Completely true."

Question	Score
1. I am juggling many responsibilities and feel like I can't keep up with the demands in my life.	
2. When I stop, I feel physically or emotionally exhausted.	
3. I wish I could take a significant break to rest and reflect on my life with some soul-searching.	
4. My spiritual life feels dry and lifeless.	
5. I have a hard time sensing God's presence in my life or experiencing his love for me.	

Question	Score
6. I seem to struggle with the same issues over and over in my life and don't know why.	
7. I don't like to think about negative or uncomfortable things for too long, and I distract myself to feel better.	
8. I'm uncomfortable with strong emotions and would rather focus on practical, sensible things.	
9. I feel stuck, knowing I need to make some changes but unsure where to start.	
10. People rely on me and think of me as competent, but I don't know how I feel or even if I care anymore.	

If your total score is 10 to 20, you appear to have good self-awareness. Use this opportunity to learn how to truly live out what you know. Really allow yourself to absorb what the Lord says about living life to the full.

If your total score is between 21 and 30, your life could use some improvement. Take a look at the scores of 3 or higher to identify what you need to focus your attention on.

If your total score is between 31 and 50 take heed. You and people like you are living life in a less-than-full way God never intended. Seize this opportunity to recalibrate your life, and believe the promise that when you dig deep, as uncomfortable as it may be, the rewards are sure to follow.

Regardless of where you are, slow down *and let yourself be rescued*. As you read, when something catches your attention, *stop* and ponder it. Turn it over in your mind, apply it to different circumstances and situations of your life. How might that have changed what happened back there? When something here connects, stop and ask, "What am I feeling?" "What does this mean for me?" "What are you telling me, God?"

Go deep. And allow yourself to process and reflect. Journal your thoughts and capture your journey. Take a year or longer to read this book if necessary. In a time-starved life, it's always the case that we forfeit introspection. If you're like most people, you've scorned the value of allowing yourself to sit quietly and reflect

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on something that's personal, *just for you*. The competing demands of a multitude of tasks before us would keep you shipwrecked. But fortunately, you haven't lost your God-given ability to grow and to change from the inside out.

Slow down.

While you could certainly use this book as another prescription to treat your symptoms, stop right now and ask if God wants *more* for you than short-term solutions-oriented therapy. Focusing only on stopping the pain will prevent you from finding solutions that will actually address your deeper problem. Quick fixes can be valuable and provide you with good, concrete advice, but that's not this book.

Like long-term insight-oriented therapy, this book is meant to guide you on a self-reflective journey to help you make deep personal change for *life*. At the end of each chapter, you will find reflection questions to help you go deeper, in the section entitled "Digging Deep." These exercises are offered for you as guidelines, not prescriptions, so don't let yourself be overwhelmed by the tasks. Do as much or as little as you choose. Go back as many times as you need to. You pace it. Listen to God's leading on what you choose to do or not do, as well as the timing.

Spend time journaling your answers to the reflection questions. Do all of your journaling in the same notebook or computer folder so you can track your progress as you finish each chapter—and check back in a year or two to see how far you've come.

If you do this, let yourself go deep into the unexplored "scary" places, those vulnerable areas. If you allow yourself to get honest and face your true emotions, you will begin to grieve what you've been missing. You already know it will be painful, but I promise you, it will carry with the pain a joy you've never known before. Your Father—the one who loves you exactly the way you are and sees you perfectly—waits for you. And I promise you that meeting him there will be life-changing.

Whatever led you to pick up this book, the title or description, a recommendation or "chance," *God* led you to it. Pursue that leading. Jesus said, "*A man can receive nothing unless it has been given him from heaven*" (John 3:27, NASB). I pray that somehow the longing in your soul for more, the hunger deep within you for something unnameable, the part of you that cries "Is this it?" as you contemplate your life, will lead you to search for a full life with your Father—a fully lived life.

Don't ignore the call to freedom. Stop pretending. Your life depends on it.

I invite you now to open your heart to the possibility of more. Begin your journey of introspection and freedom. Seek out the life of fullness Jesus promises you. Section 1 will lay out the ways you are soul weary and the barriers that prevent you from living a full life. Section 2 will draw you closer to God's heart

for you as you choose to return to the full life he offers. And Section 3 describes the life of fullness you are meant to live—a fully lived life.

Over the years, I've walked with many clients in this same way, and when they've had the courage to "go deep," I've had the privilege of seeing our Father heal their brokenness and pain, bring astonishing beauty out of ashes and miraculously transform their lives. And so it's my joy to dedicate this book to these courageous people of faith. They have been an awe-inspiring testimony to me as I've watched them choose to live *the full life*. You will hear their stories (their identity and certain details have been changed to preserve their anonymity) and be inspired along your way.

If you will slow down to take this journey now, you *will* be transformed.

That's not my promise; it's God's. And it's my sincere prayer for you as you read this book.

Come and see. Our Father is inviting you to a full life with him.

SECTION I

Soul Weary

*That is why many among you are weak and sick,
and a number of you have fallen asleep.*

1 Corinthians 11:30

CHAPTER 1

Does God Care?

God, are you avoiding me? Where are you when I need you?

Psalm 10:1, MSG

Yvette stared at me stonily, mouth compressed tightly. She had finally revealed the story of her tragic history, the years of abuse she had endured at the hands of her father, who used her sexually and robbed her of the ability to trust another man. My eyes filled with tears as I heard her story, but she remained stoic even in the face of my compassion. We looked at each other, I, mute in my sorrow for her, she, silent in her taut self-control. Finally, she spoke in a monotone, telling me she was “fine.” Yet her anxiety was betrayed by the tightness in her expression and the stiff way she held her shoulders and clenched her fists. After another moment of silence, she changed subjects and began speaking about her problems with insomnia and unexplained aches and pains.

A faithful follower of Jesus Christ, Yvette came to see me when she began to suffer from depression and baffling panic attacks that would not lift, no matter how often she prayed or delved into God’s promises through the Scriptures. At the time I first met her, she was serving on three different ministries and was lauded for her exemplary “servant’s heart.” But secretly, to her shame, she could not break free from her struggles with depression, and she was afraid that she was going to one day act out on her increasingly dark and suicidal thoughts. And so she fought her shame with anger and self-hatred, beating herself up for her failure as a Christian.

To be honest, Yvette was hard to like, at least at first. I don’t think she liked *me*. There was a hardness to her, a bitterness that was hard to penetrate. I don’t know why she continued to come faithfully, because I could not seem to make a dent in her guard. Every time I thought I was beginning to see some vulnerabil-

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ity in her eyes, she shut it down quickly. But no matter how often she blasted me away with her anger, I kept picturing her as that little girl, defenceless and scared. Who did she have to protect her? No wonder she had to put up a protective wall around her heart.

I also knew that because of the wounds she had suffered growing up, Yvette had a canyon between her head knowledge of God's love for her and her experience of that truth in her heart. She knew the "rules" of her faith, which she followed strictly, but she didn't know the heart of her Father. Not really. And I knew that because of this rift, she was missing out on the life of abundance—the full life—that was supposed to be her birthright as a Christ-follower.

The Legacy of Adam and Eve

From the Garden of Eden until today, we have all struggled with believing in God's love for us. We question whether God will really pull through for us; we wonder if he's holding out on us and what we might be missing out on; we doubt if God *really* knows our needs and if he will meet them; and we question the trustworthiness of God's promises as we wonder whether we need to take things into our own hands.

We all know the story. The serpent whispered into Eve's ear, "God's holding out on you. He doesn't want you to have the very thing you need." The moment she allowed his sly whispers to create doubt in her mind, she began to fear that she was missing out on something big. And we know how infectious fear can be, as Adam chose also to eat from the same fruit of doubt. And after they took that bite of the fruit, they began to feel shame and, out of that shame, a fear of being naked before God, and so they hid themselves. Fear and doubt began to control them and dictate to them what they should do, even forcing them to turn away from the only One who could free them and heal them. Imagine being forced to leave the Garden of Eden, the only home you've known, and begin life separated from your loving Father. Imagine the horror that must have gripped them as they faced a life without him to protect and guide them. That legacy continues to haunt us today.

How many times have you questioned God's goodness and love for you when something difficult happens? I don't know about you, but I never faced that reality until I was forced to look into the darkness in my heart. Like many people, I shielded myself with busyness and attempts to win God's love by my good works. And then once I was exhausted by my efforts, I blamed God for abandoning me. I wondered whether the abundant life was a lie. I looked around and saw pain and chaos in my life and in the world. And I broke down.

Where is this life of *fullness* we're supposed to have? Especially when your life doesn't look much better than those who don't even believe in God?

Can I Trust You, God?

One of the most painful truths I've ever had to face was that I wasn't living a life of fullness with God because *I did not trust him*. I couldn't. And I could not trust him because I didn't feel safe enough with him...I had never experienced him as trustworthy in my life.

Maybe you know what I'm talking about.

God has let us down; he hasn't acted in the way we think he should have. We're taught that God loves us, but when we see the pain and suffering we all experience, there's a disconnect we can't reconcile.

And if I can't reconcile that then I have *no choice* but to rely on myself to get through life. And I eat the fruit. I make my own way. I try to "earn" God's approval. But fear-based living only leads to legalism, and duty-based obedience is not a life lived fully.

I used to hear leaders talk about God's love and what it means to be his "beloved child," and my inner cynic stood back and scoffed. Do you tell a mother who's just lost her son to suicide that she needs to surrender more fully to God in faith? Or a husband whose wife has just left him for the third time for another woman that he should just "let go and let God" be in control?

What do you tell Yvette?

Do You Really Care About Me, God?

When you line up the pain and suffering of life with the words of God's love, we feel this disconnect deep in our hearts. That's when our heart splits off and God's Word becomes empty words. We're told we need to believe more and have more faith, but our experience of life tells us there's something different from what we're seeing in God's Word.

Brent Curtis and John Eldredge say it well in *The Sacred Romance*:

In the secret places of our hearts, we believe God is the One who did not protect us from these things or even the One who perpetrated them on us. Our questions about him make us begin to live with a deep apprehension that clings anxiously to the depths of our hearts... Do you really care for me, God? This is the question that has shipwrecked many of our hearts, leaving them grounded on reefs of pain and doubt, no longer free

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to accompany us on spiritual pilgrimage...What are we to make of God's wildness in allowing these things to happen?¹

And so we cope by shutting down our hearts, buttoning down our passions tightly, and ignoring our emotional life to the point that we completely lose touch with our hearts. It's more comfortable living in our rational minds, isn't it? I know I find it easier not to feel sometimes. Less painful. And since our sin struggles are probably rooted in our wayward hearts anyway, it's safer to clamp down on our uncontrolled emotions. Sure, we squeeze the very life out of our souls and the joy out of our lives. But at least we're in control.

Some of us have operated so long at the intellectual level that we take pride in maintaining tight control of ourselves, in being able to step back from our emotions to focus on the task at hand or the problem to be solved, to just "get on with it" without all the fuss of the emotional baggage that some other people seem to have. Well-ordered efficiency is valued over the messiness of relationship. Connection *with* God is replaced by knowledge *of* God.

Programs and principles rule over our wayward hearts, directing us to colour neatly within the prescribed Christian lines. Life becomes a series of principles, and relationships become a list of "to-dos." The music of our inner life, the passion and sorrows of our hearts, the life of the deep places within us, all of this dies a slow death under the unrelenting tyranny of our intellect. We end up sleep-walking through our lives.

Does this sound like you at all? Do you want more but you're afraid to go deeper? Or are you ready to ask, "Is life working for me? Am I truly living the life I was meant to live?"

For Yvette, soul rescue meant opening her heart to the One who *is* heaven on earth. Connection *with* God instead of knowledge *of* God. After years of burying her battered heart, she finally begun to experience her Father's love for her. Slowly, after months of sitting with her, holding her pain for her, accepting her anger, loving her through her darkest moments, I had the privilege of seeing Yvette come awake.

It wasn't through my answers to her questions or the practical tips I could give her—for what answers can you give someone who has suffered the greatest of betrayals? Instead, it was through a sacred time each week in my little office when she was able to experience the tender love of her Father as she chose to dig deep and face her wounds and broken trust. Today, Yvette is an incredible encouragement to others because she reflects God's love while walking with them through the dark valleys of their lives.

DR. MERRY C. LIN

Digging Deep

What about you? Are you longing for a transformation like Yvette's, rescue for *your* soul?

If your heart is buried, you may not feel it. But if you're curious or feel any stirring, this process of introspection and discovery could be revealing for you. As you read the chapters that follow, get gut-honest with yourself. The Lord is waiting to awaken your soul if you'll allow him to speak to your heart.

I can promise you, it will be worth it.