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does anyone ever really change?

My husband's parents were coming for a visit—reason enough to paint the basement, let alone clean the refrigerator, as any woman knows. When company comes, we put our best foot forward, especially when the company coming is the in-laws. We color our hair, buy a new top, hide the nail holes in the wall with toothpaste; we make one more pass at teaching the dog to sit and our children to read, sit up straight, and chew with their mouths closed—all within a period of about forty-eight hours.

A few days before their arrival, John's mother mentioned that she wanted to take me to get a massage during their stay.

Yikes.

I had never had a massage before, and the thought of some stranger touching my body was *not* an appealing one to me. My mother-in-law assured me I would love it. I hoped I would. But I didn't think so. You see, I didn't love my body. Far to the contrary—I

was embarrassed by it. I didn't exactly relish the thought of exposing it to the hands of some strange masseuse. How does one lose ten pounds in four days? I googled it. It involves lemon juice and cayenne pepper. I couldn't do it. But I had to go. It was her gift to me. She was excited to give it. I needed to be grateful to receive it. Or at least appear to be.

After checking in at the spa, we were both given soft, luxurious bathrobes and a pair of plastic slippers. We were shown to the changing area with lockers for our clothes, purses, and jewelry. I looked at Mom and asked with dread, "*All* our clothes?"

"Yes, all your clothes." Seeing the look on my face, she graciously added, "You can keep your underwear on if you'd be more comfortable."

Ummmm ... *Yes*.

The time came for me to try to discreetly undress and put on the bathrobe while not exposing an inch of skin to any woman who might happen to glance my way. That was difficult, but I was determined. I was also uncomfortable. Then I was mortified. The one-size-fits-all bathrobe didn't fit *all*. I was too large for it.

Securing my nonemotional, matter-of-fact face, I put my clothes back on and headed out front to speak the dreaded words, "This doesn't fit me. Do you have anything larger?"

They did have a larger robe. They had a man's robe. An extra large man's robe. In a much different color from the women's robes.

Here we were at this spa, sitting in the waiting room, surrounded by lots of other women wearing matching bathrobes, and I was wearing one that might as well have been flashing an orange neon glow-in-the-dark sign that read "obese."

I went into the bathroom and cried. I vowed never to be in that situation again.

But eleven years later, one hundred pounds down and ninety back up, I was. Different gift. Different spa. Different robe. But no larger size available.

Why don't I have victory here? Why haven't I been able to maintain lasting change? What is wrong with me? Have you ever felt that? Maybe not with your weight, but with some area of your life?

why here and not there?

I remember well the laughter of an older friend over my inability to lose weight. It wasn't cruel laughter; it was lighthearted. With delight in her eyes and a deep sense of knowing, she asked me, how hard did I think it would be for God to take care of that struggle for me? With a snap of her fingers she demonstrated how quickly he could remove all compulsion to use food to comfort myself, numb my pain, or simply escape.

Well, then, if it would be so easy for him, why wasn't he doing it? I certainly had asked him, pleaded with him, cried out to him for help here. So it's *his* fault, really. That's how I felt.

The thing is, I *have* experienced change—miraculous change. Shortly before becoming a Christian in my early twenties, I had wanted to clean up my act. I'd become acutely aware of my dependence on drugs and alcohol, how I was using them every single day in order to endure my life or at least keep the pain at bay. I decided that I would quit cold turkey. I wouldn't smoke pot, do any drugs, or drink alcohol, and while I was at it, I'd stop eating sugar, too. I didn't make it twenty-four hours. On any front.

Dang.

One night, in desperation and hope, I gave up trying to fix my life and collapsed into the waiting arms of Jesus, responding to his invitation, “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me.... For my yoke is easy and my burden is light” (Matt. 11:28–30). I had finished reading the verses and fallen on the floor.

I was weary beyond words. My life was a shambles. My heart was shattered, and I had done much of the shattering myself. I confessed my deep need to God and asked him to come for me, if he would have me. I gave my life to Jesus, mess that it was, mess that I was, and he *did* come for me. My little salvation prayer worked.

Two weeks later, I realized that I had not smoked any pot, taken any drugs, or drunk any alcohol since my prayer. Two weeks. This broke all records from the previous ten years. This was a true blue, bona fide miracle. God delivered me from even the *desire* to use anything. I didn’t want to, and I didn’t need to. I was awakened to my soul and to the presence of God and to hope. And yeah, baby, there were hard days in that season, but the myriad of stories I have of God’s miraculous coming for me in the nick of time are glorious.

Back then, food wasn’t a huge issue. I wasn’t overweight, and I wasn’t inclined to binge. That came later. But when it came, it came with an unyielding power that all my prayer and efforts, repentance, determination, and willpower could not budge.

God delivered me once. Why wouldn’t he snap his fingers and do it again?

Many women feel like a failure as a woman. I know that oftentimes I do. A failure as a human being, really. It has affected

just about everything I have done and everything I have been kept from doing. But I am not a failure as a human being or as a woman. In some core place deep within, I know this. I fail, yes. But *I* am not a failure. I disappoint. But *I* am not a disappointment. Yet when I find myself again in this place—losing the battle for my beauty, my body, my heart—I can sure feel like a failure in every way. And isn't that true for every woman? Don't we all have secret places where we are not living in the victory we long for, places that color how we see ourselves? Doesn't it go on to become a barrier between us and the people in our lives? A wall separating us from the love of God?

Or is it just me?

I didn't think so.

Sometimes we feel hopeless to ever change simply because our personal history is filled with our failed attempts to change. Where was that angel who was supposed to be guarding our tongue and preventing those harsh words from lashing out at our children? What happened to that fruit of the Spirit that was empowering us to be self-controlled and pass by the donut section? God has not given me a spirit of fear, so why am I so consumed with worry over my children, my finances, my future? If the fear of man is a snare, why do I still find I am terrified of exposing my true self and then being rejected? My bondage to food has been revealed as a liar and a thief, and yet in the moment of pain, too often I still turn to it.

God knows.

God knows.

He has not turned his face away. The very fact that we long for the change we do is a sign that *we are meant to have it*. Our very

dissatisfaction with our weaknesses and struggles points to the reality that continuing to live in them is not our destiny.

Read those two sentences again. Let hope rise. Why are you struggling with the things you do? There is a reason. It is found in the life you have lived, the wounds you have received, what you have come to believe about yourself because of them, and not having a clue how to bear your sorrow. It is also because of who you are meant to be.

It is not too late. It is not too hard. You are not too much. God's mercies are new every morning. There is mercy in his eyes even now.

rising to the occasion

I hate spiders. They are creepy. Movies have been made about giant poisonous spiders invading from the Amazon. There's an old movie about a massive spider hiding in train tunnels, and then of course there's that nasty giant spider who chased down a poor helpless hobbit. Spiders. Yuck. They are guaranteed to draw screams.

I used to scream when I came upon one in the bathroom. I was almost twelve years old when my mother refused to come and kill the hairy terrifying thing in the sink for me. "Don't be ridiculous. You do it." I mustered all my bravery into a wad of toilet paper and squished the poor thing. Afterward, I was pretty sure that all of this spider's relatives, all of its aunts and uncles and brothers and sisters and mother and father, were going to come after me for revenge. They would probably creep up on me sometime during the night. Yes, it was an irrational fear. Well, maybe. Anyway, I hate spiders.

When I was twenty-three I lived for a year by myself in a one-room cottage behind a friend's home. It was tiny. It was perfect for me. It had one drawback. You guessed it—it was filled with spiders. I would wake each morning to at least ten spread out on the walls, greeting me to the new day. When I returned from work at night, a dozen more would be staggered around the room to welcome me home. I adjusted. I no longer scream when I see a spider (usually), and yes, I can kill them all by myself. If I have to.

My living situation, growing up and out, forced me to take responsibility for my little world. You know the saying: "Adapt or die." Or maybe it was, "That which does not kill you makes you stronger." Either way, I needed to support myself. Pay rent. Buy car insurance. Plan a wedding. Kill or ignore invading spiders. I needed to rise to the occasion of my life. It took practice. Killing that first spider as a young woman on the verge of adolescence was a milestone for me, and over time I became a woman who possesses the capacity not to be paralyzed in the presence of an eight-legged creature. I changed. And that's a good thing.

Maybe you never were afraid of spiders. Maybe you are like my friend Sam, who captures any and all invading insects—yes, even spiders—gently transporting them to her backyard and releasing them to buggy freedom. But you do have those places in your life where you want to grow up. You want to be free.

I believe you can.

I believe God is in the business of setting us free, making each of us into the woman he always wanted us to be. The woman *we* always wanted to be. Sometimes he does it with the flip of a switch. But not most of the time (as you well know). Most of the time God invites us

into a *process* of change—a process where by his grace we can rise to the occasion of our lives. But before we talk about that process, there are a few things we need to get straight.

shame and discipline won't cut it

First, shame is not an agent of change.

Like a shot of caffeine in the morning, self-loathing may propel us onto the road of change, but we will find that hatred of self only leads us onto a never-ending roundabout. Like being terrified by a number on the scale in the morning and vowing never to overeat again, a shot of shame may get us through to lunch but never through to our freedom. Self-hatred, shame, and fear—though rampant in so many of our hidden worlds—are simply never going to be capable of creating or sustaining the growth we long for. Yet most women try to use shame as their inner motivator. I know I have.

Self-discipline isn't going to cut it either.

Discipline, particularly spiritual discipline, is a holy and good thing, one that increases over a lifetime of practice. But when we lean on it alone to bring about the change we long for, we find that the fruit is *not* a grace-filled woman. We get angry; we get discouraged. If we do make it through a few battles, we can easily become the kind of woman who pressures others to do the same, a hard and get-your-act-together kind of woman. With self-discipline, the focus remains “self,” so we are already off to a bad start. Trying, striving, working harder may get us through the week, but it won't take us through the decades. Yet most Christian women believe that this is the way to handle our external world.

got a kick out of an email I received last week:

Some women at our church decided to do a study on the Proverbs 31 woman. I joined because I want to get to know these ladies, but really, I loathe the Proverbs 31 woman. She makes me feel like *&#@. But anyway, last week the study told us to buy a new mattress (so we sleep better, so we can serve more) and clean out our pantry, and yesterday it said I should only eat vegetables and water for the next 10 days (like Daniel), and today I'm supposed to stop eating sugar (and serving it to my family). I say to my husband, "So, we need a new mattress and we are going vegetarian and I'm cutting out all sugar from your diet and mine." He remarks: "No wonder you hate her!"

Now, some of those changes may be good things. Maybe God is calling her or us to do some of those things. But true transformation cannot be forced from the outside. It's an inside-out process. Who of us has not received or created a list of ways to live, eat, exercise, respond, seek God, grow, and change—and how long did it last, if it worked at all? Those lists don't work very long for *anyone*, and so we fall back into self-contempt. The problem does not lie with our lack of discipline. The problem is in the approach. The problem lies with the lists.

By the way, we humans are great ones for making lists. Codes of behavior. Rules of etiquette. Do not reapply your lipstick in public.

Cover your mouth when you yawn. Wedding gifts can be sent up to a year after the event, but for heaven's sake, kindly let them know if you are attending or not. Keep your napkin on your lap. Don't talk while you are eating. Chew with your mouth closed. Come to a complete stop at a stop sign. Use your turn signals. Don't interrupt. Wait your turn. Stand up straight. Register to vote.

Aren't you tired just reading this?

God gave Israel a fabulous list. Do not lie. Do not steal. Do not covet your neighbor's wife, servant, ox, donkey, or new car. Was it really too much to ask? Noble as the list was, the people found they couldn't keep it for a day. Enter Jesus. In his famous Sermon on the Mount, Jesus taught that lusting after a woman (or man) *in your heart* was the same thing as committing adultery. He taught that hating a person *in your heart* was the same as murdering that person. Ummmm, we are all in trouble here.

A list of laws, rules, tips, techniques, and strategies does not a transformed heart make. No wonder 95 percent of all people who lose weight are unable to keep it off. Diet programs work. If you work the program. But they work from the outside in, and without substantive internal change, it's impossible to hold the ground of a lower BMI. Yes, we all have areas in our lives we want and need to change, but the only way that is going to happen is when we have a change of *heart*.

Scrooge had a change of heart, so he gave Bob Cratchit a raise. Cinderella had a change of heart, so she went to the ball. Raging Saul the Pharisee had a change of heart, so he became missionary number one for Jesus. I had a change of heart when I surrendered my life and

gave it over to Jesus. When my heart came home to its true Home, a lot of change instantly happened.

When we have a change of heart on the inside, it manifests itself on the outside. But you and I both know by now that most of our healing and changing doesn't happen at the moment of our conversion. We walk it out. God invites us into a process. Our journey to get there takes place in the day in and day out of the dusty and gritty here and now. And it is to the dusty, gritty here and now that Jesus comes.

So shame isn't gonna do it, and discipline isn't gonna do it. God invites us to join him in the process whereby he heals our inner world so he can transform our outer world.

One more point before we explore how.

God is not going to love me any more or any differently when and if I finally lose this weight and become free from the stranglehold of food. Jesus's love for me, my Father's love for me, never changes. Yeah, okay, fellowship may be strained at times, but his heart toward me does not change. He is passionately in love with me. Even better, I think he likes me. And by the way, he's got a pretty huge thing for you, too. Yes, you. So what does being loved like that mean? Does that even matter? Does it make any difference in my day-to-day life? You bet it does.

we are loved

God has a thing for human beings. Though as you look around the planet, this does at times seem hard to believe, it remains true. We are loved. Born out of love, into love, to know love, and to be loved. Yes,

we were born into a fallen, sorry world, which is at the same time more lovely than any fairy tale. It is both. And in this beautiful, heartbreaking world, God—the eternal, omniscient, amazing One—loves human beings. Including you. Especially you.

You are amazing.

Well, okay, maybe not every day. Every day the wonder of you is amazing, but many days the wonder of you is buried beneath the rubble of a world gone mad. You were born into a glorious mess, and we all have become something of a glorious mess ourselves. And in the midst of our mess, God has a thing for us. He does not despise our humanity or despair over our condition as we sometimes do. He does not turn his face away from us in our failings or our self-centeredness, as we would like to. He is not *surprised*. He is aware that we are but dust and our feet are made of clay, and he has made arrangements for us to not stay that way.

Let me say this truth again: you are loved. Deeply. Profoundly. Unimaginably loved. And you are a wondrous creature. Whether you can kill a spider or not. Whether the one-size-fits-all bathrobe swallows you or won't cover you. Whether you are having victory in every area of your life or not. Whether you just lost your temper (again) or indulged in a fantasy, another cookie, or thoughts of self-contempt. You are loved. Right here in this very moment, you are loved and pursued and seen by the One who sees everything. He knows you better than you know yourself, and you have never been a disappointment to him.

You are not disappointing him now. You may be disappointed, but he is not. Jesus knew what he was in for when he came “to seek and to save what was lost” (Luke 19:10). He came to seek and to

save *all* that was lost—in our loving and living and dreaming and longing. He has saved us, and he is saving us still. We are being transformed into the very image of Christ. Whether we feel like it or not.

And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit. (2 Cor. 3:18)

I know, I know—most days it sure doesn't feel like ever-increasing glory. It's a mess. And God is in the mess. He is about transforming our inner mess so he can transform the rest of the mess. Our transformation begins when we believe we are loved.

Jesus understands our struggles and our sorrows. He knows that our hearts have been broken, and he has come to heal them. He knows we long to change; he knows what needs to happen and where. He knows what is in the way. Though we are too much for ourselves, we are not too much for him.

Jesus will show us the way. Jesus is the Way. Which brings us to a shining paradox.

becoming

My friend Julie was being faithful to her new fitness regime. She went for her prescribed run even though it was raining. She felt like she was slogging along yet one more time when another runner passed her, leaning like a gazelle. *Maybe fitness is only for the fittest.*

thought. *God!* she cried out, *change is so hard!* She heard his reply deep in her heart. *What if change is actually just me unveiling who you really are?*

Wait—what?

I thought we basically got rid of ourselves, one way or another, and Jesus sort of took over and lived our life for us. Didn't John the Baptist say, "He must become greater; I must become less" (John 3:30)?

This is the paradox of our change. On the one hand, it involves surrendering ourselves to God, giving everything over to him—including all our efforts to change and all our resignation that we'll never change. As C. S. Lewis said, "Until you have given up your self to Him you will not have a real self."¹

And yet God does not then toss us aside. He restores us—the real us. As he heals our inner life, he calls us to rise to the occasion of our lives. Once we surrender ourselves, he gives us back our true selves. In fact, the most important journey any person will take is the journey into becoming herself through the love of God. It is a journey that will require courage, faith, and above all a willingness to grow and to let go. The journey of becoming is one of increased self-awareness coupled with a surrender of self.

God is all about this process of becoming. We come into this world brand-spanking new and begin the journey of becoming with our first breath. Breathing is good. Perhaps we should all take a deep breath now. Listen:

The one who calls you is faithful and he will do it.

(1 Thess. 5:24)

It is a beautiful paradox that the more *God's* we become, the more *ourselves* we become—the “self” he had in mind when he thought of you before the creation of the world. She’s in there; she might be badly bruised and covered with all sorts of muck, but she’s in there. And Jesus comes to call her out. The path is a dance between choosing and yielding, desiring and relinquishing, trying and giving up.

We discover as we grow that there are tools that are not helping us along our way toward change, but hurting us.

The voice of Shame says, *I basically hate me; I need to get rid of me.* The voice of Discipline says, *I've got to fix me, because me is not good.* God says, *I love you; let me restore you.* I like that one best.

God is *unveiling* who we truly are. Unveiled faces, as Paul put it. All those veils of shame and sin and the false self, all those veils others have put upon us, thinking they know who we ought to be—God takes them all away so that with unveiled faces we might reflect his glory.

The process often feels slow, interminable even. But lasting change takes time. Anyone can muscle through a day; New Year’s resolutions may even last a few months. But God is a God of process, and he has his eye on eternity. His plans for us aren’t for a quick fix but an eternal transformation. Slowly. Carefully. Intentionally. The unveiling is taking place.

So—is there a way to speed up the process of unveiling and hasten the change we long for?

Yes. There is. Accelerating our “becoming” involves saying yes to God again and again and again. It is not a posture of striving but of releasing. It looks a lot more like yielding than pushing through to

the next goal. We collapse into God's life within us. "Christ in me, help me" becomes our prayer. That is why he often brings us to the end of our ropes, the end of ourselves. Because it is from there we turn from our striving and raise our arms in surrender to our God *again* to save us.

By faith, we turn to him. By faith, we choose to believe that he hears our prayer. By faith, we believe he is good and is for us. By faith, we trust that though we may not see it or feel it, God is at work in us and for us. Because he says he is.

together

Does anybody ever really change? I believe they do. I've seen it happen; the Scriptures promise it can happen; it's happening in me.

God has come for me, and he continues to come for me. He has healed me, and he continues to heal me. He has saved me, and he is saving me still, crafting his beauty and presence more deeply into my soul. "I Am" has taken up residence, and his very presence is changing me. He who is utterly himself is enabling me to become myself, the self he had in mind when he made me.

Think of it—God is completely himself and at peace with that fact. Isn't that what the large creature walking alongside Shasta says to him in that wonderful tale *The Horse and His Boy*? Disheartened Shasta asks the Voice next to him, "Who *are* you?" Though it is the great lion, he does not reply, "I am Aslan." Like Yahweh, he simply answers, "Myself."² He is who he is, who he has always been, and who he will always be. God is *I Am*. He is not becoming. He already is. And now, because of him, I too am becoming *myself*.

Sure, I still tend to replay conversations I've had with others in my head, looking for my mistakes, but I linger in self-contempt less these days. Yes, I still reach for carbohydrates when the only thing hungry is my soul, but I do it less often. I am growing in knowing that I am completely loved in this moment and that God isn't waiting for me to get my act together in order to become worthy of his affection. I have lost some weight. The one-size-fits-all bathrobe does fit me now. But I know that I do not possess more of God's approval because of it. I am not more qualified as a Christian. I am no more beautiful to him than I have ever been. I have only and ever been lovely to God, and so have you. In the steady face of his love, I am changing. I am becoming myself.

I know you have tried to change and hoped for change in the past. Today, God is inviting you to hope again. By *faith*. We cannot heal ourselves or free ourselves or save ourselves. We cannot become ourselves all by ourselves. But we are not by ourselves. We are seen and known and strengthened and urged on to the life we were created for by the King of Love. He wants to help us to become. He wants to help us change and grow. We can't do it, but *he can*. He's very, very good at it. It is, in fact, what he has promised to do.

For God knew his people in advance, and he chose them to become like his Son, so that his Son would be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters.

(Rom. 8:29 NLT)

Here is what I've learned:

Spiders are really ugly, but most of them cannot kill you.

We are loved beyond telling.

There are *reasons* why we struggle with the things we do.

And there is a way to become the woman God meant us to be.

Let's explore that process together.

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