

ERIN M. STRAZA

comfort detox



FINDING FREEDOM FROM
HABITS THAT BIND YOU

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COMFORT DETOX

Whether we're aware of it or not, our minds, bodies, and souls often seek out what's comfortable. Erin Straza has gone on a journey of self-discovery, awakening to her own inherent drive for a comfort that cannot truly fulfill or satisfy. She depicts her struggles with vulnerability and honesty, and shares stories of other women who are on this same path. Straza also provides practical insights and exercises to help you find freedom from the lure of the comfortable.

"With compassion and conviction, Erin Straza shows us how we can and why we must break the habits that serve self rather than others."

—Karen Swallow Prior, author of *Booked* and *Fierce Convictions*

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Introduction

Why a Detox?

Detoxing is all the rage these days. A quick online search produces testimonies from people who have detoxed from drugs, alcohol, Diet Coke, toxins, sugar, digital devices, and holiday madness. Programs are available to participate in a spring detox, the Martha's Vineyard Detox Diet, a colon cleanse, a liver cleanse, a full-body cleanse, an emotional detox, a seasonal detox, and even a post-divorce detox.

One thing is sure: we feel the need to remove the things in our lives that are weighing us down and making us feel sluggish. I see comfort as one of these shackles.

In its pure form, comfort is a gift from God. Comfort is even God himself, for he is our Comforter: "I, I am he who comforts you" (Is 51:12). Let me be clear: the comfort of God is not the problem. Like many other things this side of the fall, our understanding and pursuit of comfort is askew. We want comfort, and we can find it in full from God.

The real problem is that we have sought comfort in all the wrong places, everywhere but God. We look for comfort in people, places, and things. We return to the same faulty sources we know because the unknown is scary. We soothe the discomfort of our anxieties with food, shopping, exercise, control, sex, and isolation. Comfort

pursuits are endless. We have chased comfort all around, and it has led us to places we would never choose outright. We are all-in, all-out comfort addicts; comfort beckons, and we willingly follow.

A detox is needed if we are ever to experience true comfort that truly satisfies. And so this book is for anyone who is searching for true comfort, no matter your age, status, profession, or background. Whether old or young, rich or poor, male or female—we are all prone to turn to substitute comforts. We all need to learn how to seek the Comforter.

You may wonder whether taking the comfort detox journey will lead you to an ascetic life, one where you must purposefully choose discomfort or pain because that's a more noble pursuit. Or perhaps you wonder whether I will challenge you to live a daredevil life, tackling the things that frighten you the most—skydiving or public speaking or moving to a Third World nation or something.

I assure you, that is not the point of this book. The apostle Paul urges us “to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness” (Eph 4:22-24). A comfort detox is this same call—putting off the old ways to make room for the new.

New York Times business writer Charles Duhigg explores the science behind our patterns and routines in his book *The Power of Habit*. Duhigg explains that habits are made up of a three-part loop: a cue (what prompts your brain to autopilot mode), a routine (a pattern that is physical, mental, or emotional in nature), and a reward (the benefit or perk of the routine). Understanding and interrupting that loop is key to breaking a habit.¹ Habits give our brains the ability to conduct regular, repeated functions while in autopilot mode. On the one hand, this gives us more brainpower for other functions; habits are quite useful. On the other hand, our

habits make it difficult to switch gears once our cue is triggered. Autopilot kicks in and our habits take over—unless we work to replace them with another habit.

Living for what gives or maintains the greatest amount of personal comfort is our long-established habit. At the core, that's what comfort is—it's a habit, a way of life. Comfort has become the default. We make decisions to protect it without even realizing it. We are on autopilot, and the destination is locked in, returning us to our comfort zone time after time. Duhigg insists that “habits aren't destiny . . . [but] the brain stops fully participating in decision making . . . so unless you deliberately *fight* a habit—unless you find new routines—the pattern will unfold automatically.”² Freedom is found when undesirable habits are identified and the cue-routine-reward structure is defined, pulled apart, and reframed. In the context of our discussion, the cue is a desire for comfort, the routine is the pattern by which comfort is obtained, and the reward is some form of self-soothing, whether that be control, emotional security, power, status, or the like.

Living for what gives or maintains the greatest amount of personal comfort is our long-established habit.

Pulling those elements apart is tough work. But really, Christians have an advantage here. New life in Christ infuses us with his Spirit, granting us power to say no to sin and yes to righteousness. With a better understanding of the Spirit's presence and promise to us, we can tackle this comfort habit head on. It will take some prayer, some journaling, some heavenly insight, some time, some practice. We need to introduce new information into our patterns to disrupt our autopilot and wake our brains up from their comfort stupor. Our brains need to engage and make decisions again, instead of floating along the paths of least resistance.

Some habits are so well ingrained that we can't even see them. We've grown blind to them, and our brains are content to run on autopilot. That's another reason why a detox is so beneficial. It will make us aware of the habits running our lives behind the scenes and below the surface.

Awareness is only half the battle though. Once we see how comfort has shrunk our lives down to a fraction of all God intended, then the hard work begins. We have to push back against the mindlessness. We need to practice new habits that are truly life giving, ones that lead us back to God. In a sermon titled "The Expulsive Power of a New Affection," Scottish preacher Thomas Chalmers said, "The only way to dispossess [the heart] of an old affection, is by the expulsive power of a new one."³ A new affection is the only thing strong enough to overcome an old one. We must become captivated by the God who loves us enough to provide the comfort we so desperately need.

My own comfort detox began with putting off the sluggish and selfish thought-habits I had always practiced. And this is where your comfort detox begins as well: on the inside, dealing with the way you process information to make everyday decisions. I dub this our *decision matrix*. Each one of us has an internal set of values by which we live our lives. When we face a choice, these values tell us—even subconsciously—how a particular opportunity aligns with our value system. The decision matrix runs its split-second analysis, spitting out either a yes or a no, thereby determining our next steps. We each have a decision matrix; the question is, do we know the values that dictate what we agree to and what we decline? It's crucial to know, for this matrix holds much power over us, keeping us within our predefined comfort zones. We will have to take a brave look within to trace words and actions back to the root of comfort addiction. And then we will ask God to do the miraculous: to

tear down the old matrix so that he can rebuild a new one set on something more worthy than personal comfort.

Although I am not sure what God will teach you along the way or what he may ask you to do, one thing we can know for certain is that our God is not anti-comfort. Rather, he asks us to put off pseudo comforts to make room for true comfort—the comfort that flows straight from him, our Comforter. We have run for so long to false comforts, however, that true comfort seems hard to find. Running to God is not automatic, even for the Christian. Old habits die hard. So practice we must if we are to develop new ways of thinking about and pursuing true comfort. That’s the putting on part that Paul speaks of in his letter to the Ephesians. We need to retrain our brains, our hearts, and our wills to seek a comfort that truly satisfies.

We need to retrain our brains, our hearts, and our wills to seek a comfort that truly satisfies.

This is why we need a detox. Breaking old habits is never easy! And our bad habits have a way of binding us to life-depleting thought patterns and behaviors. Detoxing will upend those draining habits, thereby flooding new life and light into worn-out places. It’s an out-with-the-old, in-with-the-new exchange. The detox process is as simple—and as difficult—as that. The Bible tells us that no discipline is pleasant in the moment; on the flip side, however, the hard work of discipline promises to yield a plentiful harvest for those who have been trained by it (Heb 12:11). Saying no to false comfort breaks its hold on our hearts, giving us space enough to breathe, to think, and to seek God and true comfort instead of short-lived substitutes. If we submit to the discipline of saying no to pseudo comforts and saying yes to the real thing, plentiful comfort will be ours to enjoy. Learning to seek God instead of our vices will yield a multitude of blessing. The promised harvest is well worth the detox process.

We must begin by clearing out the clutter and putting off the old ways. Be gentle with yourself as you enter into this process. Ask God to show you how comfort has gone rogue in your life, binding you to unhealthy, ungodly habits. Consider how you can practice saying no to the false and yes to true. In essence, you will be saying yes to more of God's presence and provision for your every need.

To help you keep moving forward in the process, I've included a section at the end of each chapter called Comfort Cleanse. The Comfort Cleanse steps have also been packaged in a free journal available as a downloadable print-ready PDF at ivpress.com/comfortdetox. (A full list of resource links can be found at erinstraza.com/comfort-detox.) Both the book and the journal will walk you through the main concepts of a comfort detox by providing activities and application exercises. Each exercise is tagged as a step, but please know that you may be processing these steps in tandem rather than in succession. Feel free to read the book in full and then complete the Comfort Cleanse steps in weeks to come, or complete the steps as you read each chapter. Either way works.

There is no ideal timeframe for working through the detox, although I suggest reading the book consistently over two or three months so you don't lose momentum. Twenty-one days seems to be the popular standard for breaking or establishing a habit. But research shows it's actually much longer—as short as two months and as long as eight.⁴ I land on the longer end of the habit-formation timeline. And maintaining the habits I've introduced and refusing to return to the ones I've put aside? That takes a lifetime. This is a marathon, not a sprint. Just like a sugar detox or a whole-body cleanse, a comfort detox isn't a once-and-done endeavor. What is learned in this season will cause great growth. But as seasons change, I've found myself revisiting old principles and applying them anew to gain new insights and nurture maturity. These ideas keep coming back around.

Of tremendous help in this progressive growth is going the way with others. Living in deep connection to friends who are pursuing Jesus is how we experience that sharpening of character, values, motives, and actions. Left to ourselves, it is easier to return to old habits along the paths of least resistance, leading us right back to comfort's door. Eugene Peterson's comments are helpful: "There are two biblical designations for people of faith that are extremely useful: *disciple* and *pilgrim*. *Disciple* (*mathētēs*) says we are people who spend our lives apprenticed to our master. . . . *Pilgrim* (*parepidēmos*) tells us we are people who spend our lives going someplace, going to God, and whose path for getting there is the way, Jesus Christ."⁵ People of faith are disciples and pilgrims, neither of which Peterson refers to in the singular. This is a team effort. We need each other for encouragement, accountability, laughter, support, and company. The people I am on the way with have made this a much better journey.

Most people I know who establish new patterns of healthy living do so in community. What we eat and the activities we choose are greatly influenced by the people we do life with. As we start this comfort detox journey, I recommend that you get your people to go with you. Working together will be easier than if you try to go the way alone. Taking steps together to say no to comfort's lure will give you momentum. We need the fire of others to keep us from growing lukewarm and weary, to remind us why comfort detox is necessary for the health of our souls.

Do you have fellow pilgrims to go the way with? Gather them up. We are going where true comfort satisfies and false comforts no longer hold sway. Invite your people to join the detox. The journey is always made sweeter with friends. In the Comfort Cleanse sections I've included steps you can take together.

We start in part one, "Comfort Gone Rogue," looking at all the ways we live bent on improving our own comfort levels through

our own resources. This is where we will face the questions that haunt our hearts and frighten us into hoarding what we have. We will gain insight on how false comfort lures us in and maintains its power over every decision. Daily decisions, relationships, lifestyle choices—all these will receive a thorough assessment to expose hidden pockets of comfort addiction.

Getting our comfort addiction out in the open is a necessary first step in the detox process. We need to know what we're dealing with! After facing our addiction head on, we turn to two beautiful words that divide our journey in half: *But God*. These are the same words echoed throughout Scripture putting an end to what was and signaling the beginning of hope. By working through the detox challenges in part one, we will have mental space and room in our hearts to consider what our lives might be if comfort addiction no longer had the strongest pull on us.

Then we venture on to the middle section, "Comfort Redeemed," where we will find a respite. Here we will pause and rest to consider the beauty and mystery of God's purposes in wiring us to be drawn to comfort. Because we are not self-sufficient, our need for God and things outside of ourselves humbles us. Our need for soothing and help is one reminder, designed to prompt us toward God for the true and lasting comfort we cannot find anywhere else in this world. As we turn from pseudo comforts, our appetites for true Comfort will grow and our satisfaction in God will deepen.

But the detox process doesn't end there! After breaking free from what's false and establishing patterns for what's true, it's time to practice new, life-giving habits. In part three, "Comfort Set Loose," we'll return to those daily decisions, relationships, and lifestyle choices from part one. Here we will live out our calling to be agents of God's comfort and mercy to others, rather than mere consumers and hoarders of it. By practicing these new habits, we will carve out a few new patterns to live by that will change the course of our days.

Getting to the end of a book can be bittersweet. Nothing beats the satisfaction of finishing a good read! But there's also sadness that the journey is done, coupled with uncertainty about how to process and apply new ideas. My desire is to help you finish this read well, so the "Parting Words: A New Kind of Normal" offers encouragement for moving forward in tangible, practical ways. Our new habits will make us into the comfort agents God has called us to be! This is how we can meet a world of need—in our homes, neighborhoods, communities, and world. Once the habits that bind us are broken, we will be free to live fully in the comfort of God.

COMFORT CLEANSE

Step 1: Gathering Your People

Eugene Peterson points out that in the Bible people of faith are referred to as disciples and pilgrims. Neither is in the singular form, which points to the necessity of living in community. The people we spend time with are the ones who hold much sway over how we live day to day. Your comfort detox journey will be much more effective if you go the way with others! I recommend that you:

- Consider downloading the free Comfort Detox Journal. Get the print-ready PDF at ivpress.com/comfortdetox.
- Find a few friends who will commit to the process with you, and write down all of your names.
- Decide how you will read this book and complete the Comfort Cleanse activities; specifically state how many pages or chapters you will read each week.
- Make a plan for discussing what you are learning; it could be

a daily text check in, a once-a-week meeting, or a once-a-month gathering.

- Share your desire for taking this comfort detox journey and any concerns you have as you begin.

A Severe Mercy

By the time I stepped off the plane in India, I was spent. Nineteen hours of travel plus the prep frenzy to leave the country had done me in. Our team's 4 a.m. arrival meant my first views of the city were shrouded in darkness; we checked into our hotel rooms to rest a few hours before the day's itinerary kicked in.

If I had known what was ahead of me that morning, I would have stayed in bed. Maybe I wouldn't have gone to India at all.

Up to that point, my life had been rather sheltered. I knew it, but I didn't know the extent of it. I had constructed for myself a comfortable life, one that limited pain of any sort as much as possible. Anything that challenged my comfort was summarily dismissed, avoided, rejected.

But then I went to India, and God shredded my heart. Everything I had come to know went through the grinder and came out the other side in fragmented pieces. This is what I call The Shredding.

It was completely disorienting, to say the least. What I saw and the people I met there broke me—and like Humpty Dumpty, there was no putting this girl back together again. My life will never be the same. I know—it sounds cliché. Girl goes to India; India changes her life. It's not cliché for me, however. It was more than a journey of self-discovery. This was a journey to understanding the very heart of God.

THE SHREDDING

That two-hour rest the morning we arrived was fitful at best. Not the best way to start a ten-day trip through Western India. I was there for my freelance writing work; one of my clients was based in India, providing a permanent, secure family for girls at risk of being trafficked into the sex trade. I was asked to join the organization's staff trip to see firsthand what I had been writing about. I jumped at the chance. Seeing new places is one of my favorite things, and going to India? How exciting! For weeks before, I imagined myself eating curry at every turn, being dazzled by beautiful saris, and meeting the seventy-five amazing girls whose lives had been rescued from destruction. It sounded utterly magical.

In many ways, it was a magical trip. *Surreal* may be a better word. This alternate reality I was dropped into took my own and turned it upside down and inside out.

Complete disorientation should have been listed as the first entry on the trip agenda. After that scant post-flight nap and a bite to eat, our team piled into the vehicles that would take us to one of the red-light districts. The frantic buzz of city traffic seemingly had a life of its own, enveloping our car into its flow. Rules of the road are less formal there, where pedestrians, bicyclists, scooters, rickshaws, and vehicles move fluidly to fill up every inch of road. It was lovely and exhilarating and overly stimulating, especially in my travel-weary state.

As our driver sped us about, weaving in and out of the hubbub, I saw much that looked familiar, reminding me of my version of normal. There were lovely hotels and buildings, shopping centers, fancy restaurants, and luxury vehicles on the streets. The opulence, however, was juxtaposed with something very different from my normal: slum-level poverty. Between newly constructed high-rise buildings were rows upon rows of tarp dividers where a seemingly

endless mass of people lived their lives. I strained my neck as we passed, trying to force my mind to make sense of what my eyes were seeing. This was real life for them. This was not normal. At least not for me.

More than 240 million people in India live on less than two dollars a day; another 939 million survive on two to ten dollars a day.¹ Based on what I was seeing, I believed it. My normal, compared to theirs, suddenly looked more like extreme wealth, with all its food, clothing, shelter, sanitation, health care, education, and opportunity.

We drove deep into the city, its crowded, narrow streets packed with vendors selling everything from fresh fruits to sunglasses to fabric to phones. Soon the driver pulled to the side—it was time to get out, to become participants in the bustle.

Our team leader instructed the women to keep sunglasses and scarves on at all times and to stick close. The men were instructed to lead the way and bring up the rear and to keep an eye out for safety concerns (whatever that meant). Then we began walking. I figured we had a bit of a trek, because I assumed the red-light district would be far removed from the regular city life happening around us.

I was wrong. We turned a corner and everything changed. With every step the cacophony of the city faded, replaced by an eerie quiet that seemed odd for mid-morning. There were a few men loitering along the edges of the buildings, staring at us suspiciously. I was equally suspicious, and my heart began to race. *What was this place?* Then it hit me: this was it. This was the district. Just one block off Main Street. Just a block over from the vendors selling food to the people who worked downtown was this place of devastation. Did the vendors and customers know what happened to women and girls just around the corner from where they grabbed lunch or walked to meetings? My mind was racing with the

absurdity of this place and its proximity to a regular life that the women and girls in the district would never know.

Walking through the neighborhood, I wanted to both take it all in and shove it all away. Extreme poverty, spiritual heaviness, staring eyes, excited children running around us—all my senses were engaged and my comfort zone was gone.

We visited with several long-time residents of the district. These women had somehow ended up there, either by birth or kidnapping, with no escape save death. Brothel owners and pimps use threats, violence, and abuse to keep their moneymakers in line. City officials turn blind eyes; some even deliver fleeing women back to their captors. There are no gates or locks to keep women inside the district—the system does it instead. The system is a spiritual stronghold, for I could feel its weight from the moment we entered. How could these women survive here, day in, day out? I begged God to help me give each woman respect through my attentive presence, even though I wanted to run. Deep breaths and prayer became my lifeline as thoughts screamed in my head: *How can this be for real? How can this woman survive in such a damp, dungeon-like room? What's that stench? Stop staring! Don't you dare cry.*

Our last visit was with a woman who warmly welcomed us to her one-room home situated in the lower level of a parking garage. The curtain that served as her front door did little to muffle the engine noise or stifle the vehicle fumes just beyond the fabric. She and our team leaders spoke for a few moments in Hindi; it seemed like small talk. It gave me time to look around and see her life. There was a bed, a few shelves with personal items, a chair, a table. But then she wanted all of our attention—she had something to show us. It was her prized possession: a hot plate. *A hot plate.* It allowed her to cook right there in her one-room home. I have never been that excited about my entire kitchen. But I couldn't rejoice over her hot plate because all I could think about was what she

faced every night, what she would face later *that* night. I was told men lined up at her curtained door—ten to twenty of them a night. On a good night, those who paid the pimp for sex with her would not beat her. This was her normal, everyday life.

It is estimated that millions of women and girls are enslaved in the sex trade in India alone.² The few women I met made this real to me. In light of these women, representative of millions more, my normal wasn't so normal. My normal looked way more like privilege, freedom, and honor. I felt ill over everything I had, everything these women did not. And the thoughts continued to rage at me: *Compared to these women, I can do anything I want with my life. Am I taking advantage of that? What would these women do if they got to live how I live? Am I squandering the life of freedom I've been given? Am I using what I've been given to multiply freedom for others?*

We walked out of the parking garage to the car that would whisk us away, back to the lives we were free to return to. We passed a group of women and children who had gathered to see the outsiders. One woman reached out and ran her hand down my sleeve. I turned and looked into her glassy eyes, giving a weak smile as I kept walking. She looked drugged, lost. What prompted her to reach out to me? What did she want? Whatever it was, I felt helpless. She was stuck in this district life; I would get to walk out and go on with mine. We got into our car, and I closed the door against the brokenness. I was glad to have a window seat so I could stare outside and gulp back tears. The massive ugly cry would have to wait.

THE QUESTION

For the entire drive back to the hotel, all the thoughts inside me could be summed up into one four-word question: *What am I doing?* The Question, as I now call it, screamed at me, inside me, touching on all aspects of how I live and view the world. It was actually the same question that had haunted me on and off over the years.

In the past, The Question had typically come at me in stealth as I went about the daily routine of my typical American life. It pounced most often when I was in an emotionally thin place—running low on rest or high on stress. One minute I would be bustling about, and then I would hear The Question, taunting me for how I was living and whether it mattered at all. *What am I doing?* would echo in my ear, as life would spin on; but it would feel like I had stepped outside time, observing myself detached from a world at full speed. My heartbeat would throb in my ears, my breath would catch, my panic would rise. It makes me shudder just thinking about it.

Have you heard its breathy whisper in your own ear? It isn't pleasant. I hated The Question because of all the discomfort it caused.

I was uncomfortable because I was never quite sure how to answer. For if I had to give an account for myself, on an average day of my fairly average life, this is what I was doing: *I work and I write. I spend time with loved ones. I read and learn. I eat good food. I rest. I entertain myself. I travel. I visit quaint coffee shops and sip four-dollar lattes. I run. I enjoy my home with heat for the cold and cold for the heat; sometimes I even clean it. I attend worship on Sundays. I pray. I play games on my smartphone. I watch TV. I do laundry (unless my husband beats me to it). I make lists of errands. I lose time on the InterWebs.* All these things and more added up to the sum of my life. This was what I was doing. Was this the answer The Question was searching

As I buzzed around, going to work and play, seeking more of the same normal that everyone around me was chasing, I wondered if this was the point of it all.

for? I'm still not sure. As I buzzed around, going to work and play, seeking more of the same normal that everyone around me was chasing, I wondered if this was the point of it all. That's why The Question haunted me—because it felt

like something was off, but I was too scared to take a long, hard look at myself to figure it out.

And that's why, over the years, I didn't give much room for The Question to linger: it made me uneasy. It disrupted the comfort I had accumulated, the routines I had established. In response to The Question I had always pressed on in my routines, holding it all tight against my chest and keeping on with the status quo.

That avoidance maneuver ran out of time for me in February 2012 when I went to India.

God's timer was ticking down to the moment when my normal would splinter and crack wide open. Normal could no longer be my shield, my covering, a way of deflecting The Question that sought to pull me into the reality of what I was doing with my life and what the rest of the world does with theirs. With The Shredding, the splintering of my normal, The Question gained full access to my heart.

I had to face it head on.

What exactly did The Shredding do to me? It forced me to see that the point of my life is not me and my whims for gaining and maintaining comfort for personal enjoyment.

It's one thing to hear about the discomfort others experience—extreme poverty, sex trafficking, brothels, slum communities, starvation, neglect, exploitation, enslavement. It's another thing to see it with your own eyes. Seeing firsthand forces you to deal with reality—to deal with the normal that is not your own. It didn't take even a day in India before I reached total meltdown. The normal I encountered was a punch in the gut.

The magnitude of need I saw was overwhelming. So many women and girls enslaved. So many people living in squalor. So much sickness, hunger, hopelessness, and darkness. There was a world in desperate need of the hope and comfort that only God could provide—yet most of my days were spent gaining and maintaining

comfort for myself. This could not be the purpose God had for me. Certainly God had more in mind for me than moving through life in a zombie-like shuffle, dead to the world's needs.

The Shredding affirmed that longing, reminding me that I have indeed been bought with a price for a purpose; my life is not my own. Now that I have been redeemed by Jesus, my life is to be poured out as a drink offering to him. I have the honor of serving as his hands and feet in this world, extending comfort to all who are in need.

If I am to do so, the contrary habits and patterns I've lived by all my life need to be undone. All the ways I've lived to expand my own comfort for my own benefit need to be dismantled. This includes my daily routines, my approach to relationships, and my life pursuits. Each of these areas needs to be examined; the decision matrix I mentioned in the introduction needs to be reset. The Shredding brought an awareness of the way comfort had been ruling my life. Embracing that awareness set my comfort detox in motion.

Your own comfort detox begins as mine did, with a Shredding that will soften your heart to receive all that God has to teach you. Now, my Shredding happened in India, but to be clear, going to India is not the prerequisite for a comfort detox. You do not need to book a trip or do something particularly momentous. God is fully capable of shredding our hearts wherever we are, to help us face the reality that everything revolves around him and his kingdom, not us. The benefits of gaining such an understanding have been invaluable for me, which is what inspired me to craft this book. As you process the ideas and complete the exercises in each chapter, you will be yielding to the heart Shredding needed for your detox and purposefully placing yourself in the pathway of God's life-changing grace. There's a saying that most of life is just about showing up. The principle seems to apply here. Most of the comfort detox process is about

showing up in God's presence and growing in awareness that living for personal comfort has dire consequences.

It's also important for me to clarify that India isn't the only place where evil is present. India didn't shred my heart because it is particularly sin ridden and broken. It just happened to be the place for God's appointed Shredding for me. Shadows fall in every country on every continent. Shadows darken hearts and minds of people from every nation and tribe and language. Shadows gather where oppression and injustice of every form rule. There is not a place on earth that isn't plagued by sin and darkness, brokenness and injustice. This is why you do not need to physically go somewhere to experience a Shredding.

But it is true that the shadows closest to us are often so familiar that we no longer see them, and we no longer break under their weight. It takes fresh experiences, surroundings, and inputs for us to see familiar shadows in a new light. You may need to expose yourself to new things so you can see the harsh shadows that linger right in front of you. Perhaps you need to watch a documentary about genocide or serve in a homeless shelter or visit a nursing home or talk to a refugee. Be willing at the start of this process to engage with uncomfortable things. Your willingness to put yourself in the midst of the world's hard reality serves to remove the familiar, the routine, and the comfortable, thereby opening eyes that have grown blind to the shadows. Old things are suddenly seen as they have always been. Stepping outside of our comfort zones forces us to see the reality that's easier to dismiss.

It takes fresh experiences, surroundings, and inputs for us to see familiar shadows in a new light.

What I saw in India did that for me, raising that vague, haunting Question to deafening levels. It was in India that The Question got in my face and wouldn't let me look away. I had no place to hide. I

couldn't busy myself with my normal life and ignore the discrepancies between my version of normal and others'. The normal I had was what I knew, but it was nothing like the normal for the enslaved, the oppressed, the poor, the needy, the outcast, the forgotten. *Normal* became a relative term. I could no longer pretend that everyone lived as I did. Going on with life as usual was no longer an option.

I have come to see *The Shredding* as God's severe mercy to me. I first heard the phrase *severe mercy* in the book by that title written by Sheldon Vanauken.³ He writes of the devastating death of his beloved wife and claims that this tragedy was God's severe mercy to draw him to saving faith in Christ. In the same way, going to India and having a meltdown was severe to me, but it was actually God's mercy. This necessary pain made it impossible for all that I was seeing and hearing and feeling in India to be seen and heard and felt *lightly*. Every encounter, every sight, every sound went deep and lodged within.

The Shredding was a painful way—the only way—for me to own what India offered to teach me.

THE CALL TO KEEP WATCH

Once I got home, the pain from *The Shredding* lingered for months. The awareness I had gained overseas allowed me to see my own community differently. In my small, Midwest town shadows were also near. People struggled with depression and hopelessness, loneliness and doubt, homelessness both physical and emotional. Here the pain can be more easily draped and covered up in well-fed, well-dressed bodies. Pain looked different from the pain I saw in India. But I could no more fix this pain than I could rescue even one woman from the red-light district. My only recourse was to cry out to God and beg him to show me how to move forward. I didn't know how to handle my comfortable life of freedom, health, security, and opportunity. I felt guilty. I felt unworthy. So I sought

my only Refuge, pouring out my tears and confessing my listlessness. These cries were not immediately answered, despite my prayerful demands for relief and direction. But I did sense God's presence, as if he was willing to sit with me and wait for me to process everything that was swirling about my heart.

In time it occurred to me that I was shredded after seeing the smallest fraction of the world's brokenness. I saw only part of the pain from a few blocks of one city in India. But God has seen it all—not only what I saw in that one city in that one country, but the full wreck of every city in every country all around the world. And in addition to today's pain, he has seen the pain of every day since the beginning of time for every person who has ever lived. If I was shredded by one experience, what unbearable grief God must bear! And if I sought comfort for the portion I saw, if I wanted company in my sorrows, doesn't it make sense that God too would long for the comfort of company in his sorrows? When have I ever kept the Lord company in his grief over this sin-plagued world?

We know Jesus sought the company of his friends before he went to the cross. The letter to the Hebrew believers says that it was for the joy set before him that Jesus willingly laid down his life to conquer the sin that has ruined us (Heb 12:2). Despite the joy, however, Jesus was certainly bearing the weight of the task ahead as well as the fear of pain and death. In that great discomfort, he went with his friends to a quiet garden to seek strength from Father God. Here's how it's described in Matthew's Gospel:

Then Jesus went with them to a place called Gethsemane, and he said to his disciples, "Sit here, while I go over there and pray." And taking with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, he began to be sorrowful and troubled. Then he said to them, "My soul is very sorrowful, even to death; remain here, and watch with me." And going a little farther he fell on his face and prayed, saying, "My Father, if it be possible,

let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will.” And he came to the disciples and found them sleeping. And he said to Peter, “So, could you not watch with me one hour?” (Mt 26:36-40)

In the midst of his grief and pain, Jesus invited his friends to be near, to keep watch with him. They were unable to stay in the pain with him; sleep overtook them that night.

We are now on the other side of the cross; Jesus was perfectly obedient to the Father’s redemption plan. Redemption is secured in Christ for us, but until it is fully realized in the age to come, pain and brokenness abound here. Certainly Jesus still looks on us as sheep without a shepherd (Mk 6:34). Certainly Jesus still longs to gather us up like a hen gathers her chicks (Mt 23:37). Certainly Jesus still weeps when we weep (Jn 11:35).

The Man of Sorrows has not changed. He sees every tear, hears every cry, and never ceases to petition the Father on our behalf. “Sit here, while I go over there and pray,” Jesus said to the disciples. Could it be that his words apply to us, that he asks us to “remain here, and watch with me”? Our inattention to his grief—our inability to watch with him one hour—is not unlike that of Peter, James, and John. This is what we all want in our grief and pain: the comfort of knowing someone cares enough to enter the grief we feel and be with us in it. This is the fullness of Immanuel, God with us. He came near to be with us in our pain, in our sorrow. And we who have experienced the true comfort of God are to follow in his footsteps, drawing near to those who need someone to keep watch in their worst trials. Only love can propel us to purposefully set aside our own comfort to feel another’s pain.

And right there, I found the way forward from The Shredding.

The world, both near and far, is in desperate need for someone to step up and care. It’s as simple as that. But it isn’t easy. Caring

requires something; it costs us. We must spend our comfort to step into the discomfort of others. And who wants to do that? We have lives to lead, work to do, projects to finish, books to read, shows to watch, shopping to do. We don't want to feel the panic of anxiety, the hollowness of grief, the disappointment of betrayal, the fear of need. There's no room for suffering here.

At least, I know I didn't have room for it. I certainly didn't want to feel the mess of emotions—mine or others'—brought on by the brokenness of this world. I had built a cozy, comfy life with a berm about it, keeping the pains of life from getting too close.

But then I went to India, and God shredded my heart so I could feel a fraction of what he feels for us. The Shredding exposed the life I had built as a barrier, the habits I had adopted for maximum comfort. They were keeping me from the very pain and grief that fueled the Lord's passion to go to the cross to free us. By taking me to India, the Lord tore apart this grinch's small heart to grow it back three sizes and more, big enough to take in the reality, the normal that others face each day, both here and abroad.

A. W. Tozer confirms: "The truth is, there are some things you cannot know until you have suffered."⁴ Until my heart suffered for the normal that others live, I would not know the answer to The Question with all its fragments and fractures. Without The Shredding, I would have returned home with some travel baubles and mementos, but as essentially the same person. God's severe mercy saved me from a shallow experience in India. It was time, God's appointed time, for me to face the pain of the world.

Because, really, this is the answer to The Question that has haunted me over the years:

What am I doing?

I am working hard to keep the uncomfortable things, the painful things, the scary things, at a safe, comfortable distance.

I have lived in my version of normal, with all of my creature comforts, and I have focused on increasing my own pleasure, safety, and wealth. The buffer I have erected around my life and heart ensures that the pain of the world won't penetrate too far.

Comfort is what I am doing.

Comfort is what we are doing.

Comfort has gone rogue in our hearts. God meant it for something more. Our self-soothing habits are keeping us from experiencing true comfort from God. The scraps we collect from various sources aren't enough, making it all too easy to disengage from those who come asking for consolation in their hour of need. The disciples couldn't stay awake when their friend needed them most; so too are we sleepy in our comfort-rich lives. And so Jesus calls us to engage and draw near to the needs in our midst, to be the sort of friends who draw on the unending comfort of God and eagerly give it away. This is love.

I mentioned previously that God must be heavy with grief over the pains of this world. Jesus was weighed down with sorrow in Gethsemane and asked his friends to keep watch with him. Perhaps there is a way to keep watch with him today—to keep watch with the 7 billion people weighed down with sorrows of their own. Jesus explains how:

When the Son of Man comes in his glory, . . . the King will say to those on his right, "Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me." Then the righteous will answer him, saying, "Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink?"

And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?" And the King will answer them, "Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me."

Then he will say to those on his left, "Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me." Then they also will answer, saying, "Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to you?" Then he will answer them, saying, "Truly, I say to you, as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me." And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life. (Mt 25:31-46)

Every time we walk in love to extend care to another, Jesus says, it's like we've done the kindness to him. Comfort detox is needed

because our habits have been set to self-soothing practices; we've become more like those goats on the left, who turn blind eyes to the hungry, thirsty,

By extending love and comfort to the broken places around us, we keep watch with Jesus in his sorrow.

lonely, naked, and imprisoned. We've forgotten our calling to be God's hands and feet to a world desperate for someone to keep watch with them. Keeping watch is all about being present, extending care, being attentive. By extending love and comfort to the broken places around us, we keep watch with Jesus in his sorrow.

This is yet another lesson from *The Shredding*: rather than hoarding what I have for my personal benefit, Jesus calls me to give

freely to everyone, thereby serving Jesus himself. I can keep watch with Jesus in his sorrow over the sin and suffering in the world by entering into the sorrows of others. I can listen. I can give food and drink. I can cry. I can pray. I can welcome the lonely. I can encourage the downtrodden. I can send a note. I can spend time. I can visit the prisoner. There are countless ways I can do *something* for the least of the world. Small acts of kindness matter, especially to Jesus.

As lovely as that sounds, it sets off a little alarm in my soul. I know myself. My decision matrix has been set for so long on self, it won't be easy to change. Doing so will cost me a measure of comfort—perhaps all I have. Like the disciples, I have fallen asleep on my friend who has asked me to keep watch with him. This is why I need a detox.

Walking through this comfort detox journey will wake us from our slumber. We'll pull up the shades of self-soothing and scatter the shadows of apathy. It's time to venture out of our normal, out of our habits and previously defined comfort zones, and to see what life is like for the rest of the world. It's time to keep the Lord company in his grief over the way sin has ruined us, to let his passion for the world empower us to lay down our lives for the least of these. We must put aside our childish notions of *comfortable* to move on to maturity: to live as God's comfort agents, distributing true comfort anywhere we find a need. We must break the habits propelling us to consume and hoard comfort only for our own benefit. We need God's mercy and grace to detox us—heart, mind, and soul.

COMFORT CLEANSE

Step 2: Embracing Reality

It's one thing to hear about the discomfort others experience. It's another thing to see it with your own eyes. Seeing firsthand forces

you to deal with reality—to deal with the normal that is not your own. How can you embrace the reality of the world’s normal at the start of your detox journey? Here are a few ideas to consider; pick one of these or create your own to complete in the next week. Visit erinstraza.com/comfort-detox for direct links to all resources.

Learn about one of the following:

- the oppression of women and girls
suggested resources: Half the Sky Movement (www.halfthesky.com/movement.org); *Born into Brothels*, a 2004 documentary directed by Zana Briski and Ross Kauffman
- systemic poverty
suggested resources: Compassion International (www.compassion.com/poverty/poverty.htm); *The End of Poverty?*, a 2008 documentary by Philippe Diaz
- genocide
suggested resources: History.com, “What Is Genocide?” (www.history.com/topics/what-is-genocide); *Hotel Rwanda*, a 2004 film directed by Terry George
- racism
suggested resources: *OVERRATED: Are We More in Love with the Idea of Changing the World Than Actually Changing the World?* by Eugene Cho; *Disunity in Christ: Uncovering the Hidden Forces That Keep Us Apart* by Christena Cleveland

Arrange a hands-on experience:

- serve at a homeless shelter
- visit a nursing home
- talk with a refugee
- help a single parent for a few hours

Step 3: A Shredding

Block out thirty minutes when you can be alone without interruption. Ask God to begin shredding your heart for the brokenness of the world. Confess the ways you have avoided facing the reality of brokenness and suffering that sent Jesus to the cross. Ask God to teach you how to keep watch with him for those who are suffering.

PART 1

comfort
gone rogue



Confined

Sometimes I wonder about my life. I lead a small life—well, valuable, but small—and sometimes I wonder, do I do it because I like it, or because I haven't been brave? So much of what I see reminds me of something I read in a book, when shouldn't it be the other way around?

KATHLEEN KELLY IN
YOU'VE GOT MAIL

Oh, Kathleen. You are speaking my language.

Kathleen Kelly is the heroine of the film *You've Got Mail*. She owns an adorable children's bookstore (be still, my heart), which her mother opened when Kathleen was just a girl. When a mega-bookstore opens down the block, Kathleen's store takes a hit financially, forcing her to assess her business and, in essence, her very life. It is in this season that she reflects on where she's been and where she's headed.

Like Kathleen, I also wonder about my life and the smallness of it. I wonder where my bravery has gone, or if I ever had it. I wonder if I've settled, and I wonder why. Such wonderings often arise after I've been sifted by The Question (the *what-am-I-doing* inquiry). When The Question comes, I am jolted, forced to look at the sum of my days and wonder some more.

But deep down I already know the truth: my life is rather small, mostly because I stay where it's comfortable. Kathleen Kelly and I are kindred hearts, mourning over a life that is valuable but lived on the fringes, where bravery isn't needed.

Our everyday choices reveal much about our addiction to comfort. Comfortable habits have led us to a smallness of life akin to Kathleen Kelly's. So this is where our journey begins, in the ordinary, normal things we do in any given moment on any given day.

HOW DID I GET HERE?

No one sets out to live a small life. For proof, think back to your senior year of high school. Before graduation, I bet you answered a survey about your postgraduation plans. My school printed our pictures and dreams in the school paper. There were rows of smiling faces, expectant of a bright future. The answers were varied, of course—and likely off base. I, for instance, said that I wanted to be an accountant. Never mind that I was (am) terrible with numbers and columns and order and such. Obviously I did not know myself very well at age seventeen.

Whatever answers we gave in senior high, we all thought our lives would be fabulous. Meaning, our lives would never resemble those of the adults we knew. Those lives seemed so steady and predictable and responsible and, well, *boring*. No—we would live rousing lives with work that changed the world and values that inspired the masses and passionate love that never waned and endless joy to fill our hearts. Maybe that's a bit dramatic—but the point is no one dreams of living a small life.

Yet here I am twenty-plus years later, a kindred spirit with Kathleen Kelly.

Friends of mine have expressed the same encroaching disenchantment with adulthood. The dreams of our youth did not deliver us from becoming those typical adults with jobs, bills, kids,

and responsibilities. We are now the boring ones in the eyes of today's youth. My dear friend Rosa, now in her mid-forties, feels this keenly:

I have worked at the same company, in the same department, for 17 years. I am very grateful for my colleagues, a wonderful manager, expertise in my field, and favorable compensation. Yet, so many days (that have turned into weeks and months) I am actively disengaged with my job. I wish I had the energy to see what else is out there. But then doubts creep in: *you should just feel grateful to have this job; you probably wouldn't be able to work from home if you switch companies; you are senior level—do you really want to start over somewhere else?* The comfort of the known job outweighs the risks of daring to find something I'm passionate about.

Maybe that's what our younger selves saw in our elders: a settling, an aversion to risk, a willingness to trade passion for comfort. Rosa is not alone. I too have settled into my grown-up life, plagued by guilt for wanting more when what I have is pretty decent. Shouldn't we, especially those of us who have faith in Jesus, be content with what we have? Shouldn't we be grateful rather than seeking more?

If the guilt of contentment doesn't get you, there is the equal but opposite guilt from a sense of duty to live a life worthy of the calling we have received (see Eph 4:1). Whatever a "worthy" life may be, our lives don't seem to measure up to all that. Compared to people who have started grand movements or launched meaningful causes, my life feels less than worthy of the calling. There is a sense, a pressure, that

There is a sense, a pressure, that we should *do* something big, and that pressure can squeeze the joy out of walking with Jesus.

we should *do* something big, and that pressure can squeeze the joy out of walking with Jesus.

These dual guilts of contentment and grandeur take turns buffeting us, tag-team style. I think it's because we really do *want* to live more than a small life. But I for one have had no clue how to do that. My life has taken on a shape, one that I chose sometime after high school—during college, perhaps, or soon after. One decision at a time, I collected the pieces of an adult life.

It's like that life management illustration, the one with the jar (representing your life) filled with rocks and pebbles and sand (representing what you do). You can add any combination of the three elements, but to make everything fit, you must put the biggest (i.e., most important) pieces in first. By the time I reached early adulthood, I had chosen what to include in my life jar (faith, education, career, relationships, interests, and such). Each piece got a bit of testing and trying, Goldilocks style.

Actually, I see quite a bit of Goldilocks in me. I've tried lots of different combinations and permutations to see what would be a good fit for my life. Christopher Booker, in his book *The Seven Basic Plots: Why We Tell Stories*, says the story of Goldilocks characterizes the “dialectical three,” where “the first is wrong in one way, the second in another or opposite way, and only the third, in the middle, is just right.”¹

Everyone does this as part of the formation and individuation process. Finding our way forward in life is needful, but stories like *Goldilocks* show the dark side, where we get so focused on arranging our Just Right that we become ravagers, eating all the food, breaking some chairs, and messing up all the beds—leaving a trail of chaos in our wake. This is the Goldilocks mentality.

I know this folly, for I have lived the Goldilocks life on a constant quest for Just Right. Finding my way forward has included plenty of sampling to arrive at the comfy middle ground in things

of faith and work and relationships and responsibilities. In time, my choices have added up and given me a very full jar, a full life, with habits and patterns that keep everything in place.

But now? My jar, the inputs, the decision matrix I used to test how it would all go together—all that needs an overhaul. Like Kathleen Kelly, I must gather up some courage and see what sort of life I've been called to lead.

TAKE A RIDE ON THE DISRUPTIVE THINKER BUS

Although I live in the flatlands of Illinois, it's Boulder, Colorado, that has my heart. I've spent extended time there over the past few years, and besides the spectacular views and food, Boulder has a quirky, eclectic vibe, with a strong pedestrian and outdoor lifestyle. There are street musicians and street markets and hippy-like people wandering about. I regularly encounter things that take me by surprise. Including a shuttle bus labeled Disruptive Thinker Transport.

I am smitten with it. The first time I saw it, I almost ran it down to find out what it was for and where it was going. A quick online search told me it was the complimentary shuttle service for employees of international advertising agency Crispin Porter + Bogusky. So very clever. Not only does the name shape the perception of CP+B for those, like me, who see it pass by, but it also must influence how the employees see themselves. These folks are supposed to live up to the disruptive thinker label, people who break out of the expected, the usual, the norm. They take risks, don't conform, and shake things up.

I found myself wishing to be worthy to ride on that bus. Not only did I appreciate the culture CP+B is seeking to develop with these transports, but it also sparked a longing in me to catch a Disruptive Thinker Transport that would deliver me to a new place spiritually speaking. After *The Shredding* I could see that comfort had a hold of me, but I wasn't quite sure how that had happened.

Nor did I know how to undo what had already become ingrained. I asked God to show me what I needed to know about comfort's hold, and he was faithful to point out the common, everyday habits and patterns contributing to the place where I found myself.

Three high-level strongholds emerged in this evaluation. My decision matrix—the one dictating my choices—was set to keep my comfort zone intact using a protective trifecta: convenience, safety, and perfection. My commitment to these three affected every decision I made, every day. The result? A sort of everyday egomania in which I make everything revolve around myself and my wishes.

Disruptive thoughts are necessary then, inspired by the truth of God's Word and what's real in the world. These strongholds must be assessed and their power broken to set comfort in its proper place. We need to break free from the thought patterns and habits solidifying our commitment to comfort. The Disruptive Thinker Transport can take us, like a bus route, to each of these strongholds. At each stop we see another way comfort's grip has uniquely become part of our daily lives.

FIRST STOP: CONVENIENCE

My jar is full, just the way I arranged it. The rocks, pebbles, and sand are all in there, just right. If my days follow the plan I've concocted, then everything fits—just right.

But life isn't always Just Right. Not typically. Typically, life doles out all manner of unexpected, unscheduled, inconvenient things. And it messes with the Just-Right life that I'm trying to maintain.

My time-blocked and color-coded calendar speaks volumes about my goals and dreams. There's room for God, running, work, writing, meetings, errands, food prepping and eating, and more. There's room for it all, if the way I've packed it is the way my days play out.

Reality is much messier and more unpredictable, however. Reality hands us—and those in our circle—all manner of trouble and discouragement and suffering, none of which I color coded into my schedule. Need does not appear on cue, complete with the tinkling bell alarm, to then disappear on command. When the needs come, I look at my calendar and my commitments and my responsibilities, and more often than not I choose to serve my schedule. Or at the very least I choose whatever option produces the smallest level of inconvenience. *For me.*

That's not quite how Jesus expected his disciples to behave. In one parable, Jesus tells of a man who was attacked by robbers, stripped naked, and beaten (Lk 10:25-37). The hoodlums then left the man for dead on the side of the road. Lucky for the victim, a priest happened to be walking that way; surely someone as good hearted as a priest would stop and care for this man! But no; the priest crossed to the other side of the road, likely pretending not to see him. A Levite came along and responded just like the priest.

I've often wondered where the priest and the Levite were going. Did they have appointments to keep, meetings to attend, ministry commitments to fulfill? Considering their station in life, I'm guessing they had plenty of "good" things to do. Stopping to help a victim would certainly disrupt the schedule and be an inconvenience. They might have had to postpone meetings, extend their time away from home, or miss an event. All inconvenient, to be sure.

As Jesus often did, in this parable he challenged assumptions about who is good and what is important. The story picks up again as the victim's rescuer enters the scene. He's the most unlikely of people, at least from a Jewish perspective: a Samaritan. Samaritans were considered impure, especially when compared to a priest and a Levite. But Jesus chose the Samaritan as the unexpected hero, the only one who did not avoid the man in need. Compassion overcame

the Samaritan, overcame the inconvenience it would be for him to stop what he was doing and help. Jesus says the Samaritan man

came to where [the victim] was, and when he saw him, *he had compassion*. He went to him and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he set him on his own animal and brought him to an inn and took care of him. And the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper, saying, “Take care of him, and whatever more you spend, I will repay you when I come back.” (Lk 10:33-35, emphasis mine)

This is how disciples of Jesus are to respond when a need crosses our paths. We are not to avoid the need but to stop and do what we can. Doing so will be disruptive. It will cost us our schedules, our plans, our time, our money—and most of all, our hearts. We will have to engage and feel compassion for the downtrodden. We will have to let the pain of a suffering world shred our hearts, freeing us from the habits we’re bound to so that there’s room for something greater: compassion.

A. W. Tozer said this in *A Disruptive Faith*: “If need be, God will interrupt your life in any way imaginable without asking your permission.”² It is God’s severe mercy to interrupt us, to inconvenience us, to break us out of our comfort habits so we can extend his hands of mercy to a world in need.

I have a dear—and wise—friend whose logical mind is a huge help to me. But because logic comes naturally to her, Dorothy says the comfort of convenience often traps her:

My natural tendency is to always take the easy way—emotionally, physically, spiritually. When a situation is presented to me, my first thoughts are: *How much time will that take, will it get messy, do I know how to do it?* . . . Convenience isn’t necessarily good. It makes you miss out on things, like strong

relationships/friendships, the joy of helping others, closeness with God, and even the ability to exercise spiritual disciplines.

After hearing my friend's heart, my first thought is that faith is anything but convenient. It requires much of us—but not without a return. God will interrupt our lives, but always for good reason—no, for the best reason. When God interrupts our routines and schedules, he gives back what Dorothy mentions: strong relationships and friendships, the joy of helping others, closeness with God, and the fruit that comes from spiritual disciplines.

Going back to the elements of habit outlined by Charles Duhigg—cue, routine, and reward—I see convenience as a major reward that motivates me. And as Duhigg explains, the power of changing a habit is identifying the reward you are seeking and working backward.³ Now that I see convenience tagged in my decision matrix, I don't want to live for it.

The cost of choosing convenience as our reward is steep. When we pass by people beaten up by this life, passed out in the ditch, it's an opportunity for us to keep watch over them in their suffering. We have a way to care for Jesus by proxy by caring for the least we encounter as we go about our day.

To do that, we need God's help. Our habits have us locked into the same comfort-ruled behavior as the priest and the Levite. We too have important things to do and places to be. But there is a greater way to live. When we make decisions based on compassion instead of comfort, we will emulate the Samaritan Jesus spoke of.

However, convenience isn't the only way comfort fools us into settling for less than God's best. Let's see how safety plays a part.

SECOND STOP: SAFETY

Something happens to our sense of adventure as we mature. The recklessness of youth gives way to the reasonableness of adulthood.

Whereas youth are busy gathering and arranging the contents of their life jars, adults are busy protecting theirs. With more to lose, adults enact measures to keep threats at a safe distance. Every action is assessed according to its potential dangers. Don't visit developing countries (illness and disease), don't fly (terrorism), don't switch jobs (financial ruin), don't go sledding (physical harm), don't speak in public (humiliation), don't run alone (abduction), don't eat sprouts from Jimmy John's (salmonella), don't shower during a thunderstorm (electrocution), don't make eye contact with the homeless (guilt), and so on. There really isn't a scenario that cannot be turned into a danger.

At this second stop on the Disruptive Thinker Transport, we need to assess how risk aversion prevents us from responding to the needs before us. This one is tricky. We often lean on common sense in matters concerning personal safety. But what if our common sense has been negatively influenced by our addiction to comfort?

What if our common sense has been negatively influenced by our addiction to comfort?

I sometimes wonder whether that's what happened to the Israelites. God had just led them out of Egypt where they had been enslaved for generations. There were plenty of signs and wonders to confirm God was leading them with power and

would protect them. But when they got to the land God had led them to, all his provision wasn't adding up to the confidence they needed to make the next move: "Then the men who had gone up [to survey the land] said, 'We are not able to go up against the people, for they are stronger than we are'" (Num 13:31).

God told the Israelites he was giving them some land. It was a done deal, a sure thing. The spies looked at it, rich with produce and crops. What they saw was good. But before the Israelites could enjoy God's promises, they would have to boot out the current

inhabitants—who looked way stronger. In that common-sense assessment, fear took over. The Israelites compared the pros of enjoying the land to the cons of taking it, and the cons shouted much louder. The Israelites said no to the promise because they would have to trade present comfort for future prosperity, and they wanted to play it safe. Tim Challies explains it like this: “Forty years and an entire generation was wasted because fear and a desire for comfort overcame trust in the promises of God. I wonder what opportunities I have wasted already, and what opportunities I will be tempted to waste today, all in the name of comfort.”⁴ *Ouch*. And so true!

As much as I want to blast the Israelites for failing to move forward in faith, I cannot. I am more like the Israelites than I care to be. It makes my stomach sink just thinking about it. The small life Kathleen Kelly spoke of, the one we lament over, is really about living with small faith. Small faith causes us to wail like the Israelites when God’s leading includes difficulty. When faced with risky situations that oppose common sense, how often do we assume God would never call us there? We go into preservation mode—a small life in the hand is worth a large life in the bush. (Or something like that.) Small faith assumes God doesn’t have our back. It also assumes that difficulty is always linked to disobedience—because God wouldn’t make us work hard or fight for what he’s already promised, right?

How many times have I chosen to adhere to the confines of my life jar and the contents therein? How often have I said no to God’s prompting to move forward and trust his leading? How often have I chosen instead to stay put because it feels safer to me?

My hesitation is often linked to uncertainty about God’s leading. Is God prompting me to start a conversation with a stranger? Is God nudging me to tutor at-risk kids? Am I supposed to turn my car around and go meet the homeless person at the corner? I have

said no to all these things (and more). I refuse to move ahead because I am not sure it's safe for me physically, emotionally, or mentally. It feels risky to me, just like taking the Promised Land felt risky to the Israelites.

Common sense tells us to play it safe and do what's most comfortable. But risk isn't as avoidable as we like to presume. Risk is present in any step of faith that places us in a position to be misunderstood, rejected, or attacked. Staying safe has dire consequences, however, that comfort chooses to ignore. The opposite of common sense isn't a daredevil lifestyle, but walking in step with God's Spirit, staying so close to him that we know when to move, when to speak, when to stay silent.

Living for safety in the middle of what's comfortable isn't the sort of life God calls his people to. The main goal isn't safety and comfort, but God's fame and glory. I doubt God's fame is increased and his glory uplifted when I live tucked inside my comfort zone, fearful of venturing outside its protective borders. Small faith like that diminishes God's reputation. Small faith like that doesn't extend God's comfort to people desperate for hope.

God has more for us. Following God's lead will mean leaving our previously defined comfort zones behind. If we stay in step with God, we will live and move and have our being in the middle of an endless safety zone that cannot be taken from us. That's where we are meant to live, there in the middle of God's will, where we move forward into seemingly unsafe places emotionally, physically, and spiritually. And there we find that God has our back.

THIRD STOP: PERFECTION

Somewhere along the way, I got the idea that people who have it all together (whatever that means) experience life like a choreographed dance. A waltz perhaps. Or those lovely English country dances featured in *Pride and Prejudice*. Everything is spinning and

turning in proper time and place, with nothing out of order. It's the picture of perfect coordination.

I thought that if I had my life jar packed just so, I would know how to make my life spin like a beautiful dance. Everything would fall into perfect place. Like magic.

Something has been out of whack though, because my life isn't quite like a fancy waltz—maybe more of a mosh pit. Everything gets jumbled and crazy, and I find myself swept off my feet, unable to steady myself.

When life doesn't move according to Elizabethan propriety, I blame myself. I wonder if I need dance lessons. I assume I've made the dance too complicated for my level of coordination, that there are simply too many moving parts. I assume a perfect life is out there to be had, if only I could figure out the steps.

At our final stop on the Disruptive Thinker Transport, we need to look at how we strive for a flawless, perfect life. Our obsession with it drives our daily choices, and not for the better.

My tendency has been to say no to anything that could intensify the mosh pit. How could I add something else to my already-crazy life? I'm aiming for *Pride and Prejudice* here. Getting involved with someone else's needs and wants will only increase the spinning and make it more difficult for me to keep up. Saying yes depletes my comfort, requiring me to give up order and ease. Comfort convinces me that the cost of keeping watch in someone else's hour of need is too great. If I'm going to maintain my beautifully coordinated, Just-Right life, I cannot take on another thing.

Women especially struggle with the pressure to have a picture-perfect life. Pinterest, Facebook, and the church all show us what's expected. Martha Stewart's craftiness. Ree Drummond's culinary prowess. Jillian Michaels's fitness. Mari Kondo's home organization. Joanna Gaines's home décor. And

do it all with the zen of Oprah, the tireless faith of Christine Caine, the wisdom of Priscilla Shirer, and the compassion of Katie Davis Majors.

Such effortless perfection actually takes concentrated effort. There's research, serving, leading, cooking, achieving, and praying to do. There's no space for others in this dance toward perfection. Once again, the Shredding has exposed my comfort-driven thinking: If I craft a perfectly ordered life that's beautiful to observe but keeps people out, is that the sort of life God wants for me?

Making my life a perfectly crafted performance drives me to keep up the illusion that I can do it all and handle it all with ease. Fixing my eyes on that prize pushes me to eliminate all other distractions, including the very people God has called me to keep watch with. While I'm busy concocting a life for others to gush over, I don't have time or energy to have the deep connections my heart craves. I've got it all wrong when I seek comfort from the perfect life I create with my own hands.

Joy is found in the connections, with people and work and passions and service. Every time I eliminate a connection because it feels like too much effort, I'm cutting off life. I hack at my commitments at church, potential friendships, visiting the sick, treating my nieces and nephews, hosting a benefit event for my favorite nonprofit, scheduling coffee with my mom, spending time with my husband, tutoring a kid in need—and on and on.

When we are driven to choose whatever maintains the illusion of perfection, we stay in the middle of comfort—stuck in a rut. Once again, this false comfort has fooled us. We have traded true life for a sham. Like those buildings on movie sets, it looks real, but there's no substance. The result is something that looks pretty from afar, but there's no life in it. It's a lifeless life.

And what's the point of that?

Lifeless life is the very thing Jesus came to rescue us from. Jesus promised, “I came that they may have life and have it abundantly” (Jn 10:10).

False comfort whispers that we should turn back from the abundant life God promises because it’s full of things that cannot be controlled and crafted—and that’s rather uncomfortable. Striving to maintain perfect order causes us to waste all that Jesus has secured in his life, through his death, and because of his resurrection. We have at our disposal the resurrection life of Jesus Christ to help us live for more than that! What Jesus has secured makes it possible for us stop striving for a perfectly ordered life, because he wants to live his perfect life through us—meaning we can step into the chaos of this world and keep watch with people who need something real.

Lifeless life is the very thing Jesus came to rescue us from.

GIVING UP MY JUST-RIGHT LIFE

I have lived a small life, on the fringes, where bravery isn’t needed. I have heard the groans of the world, and I have turned a blind eye and a deaf ear because it wasn’t easy, it looked risky, and it would upset my rhythm. I have pursued comfort with great gusto, only to find that it has overtaken me. This is common variety, everyday egomania, in which I live to make life all about me. And I want it to remain comfortable, safe, and perfectly ordered.

We live lives of small faith trying to stay pain-free and happy. It’s the false notion that I can keep the borders of my life secure, guarded against any attacks from the enemy named discomfort. My comfort zone needs to be small enough for me to patrol and protect. There isn’t energy enough to protect too much territory—I have rounds to make, people! I have to keep watch in the night. I have to run interference by holding an arm out against life itself, trying to keep it from getting too close.

At least, that's what I thought before *The Shredding*. The Disruptive Thinker Transport did its job, however, forcing me to look at all the ways I try to arrange my Just-Right life. Convenience, safety, perfection—these are daily habits built choice by choice, and they will have to be undone the same way, choice by choice. Breaking old habits and building new—that takes time, as well as lots of grace. More than that, it takes a change of heart.

Living for convenience, safety, and perfection are easy faults to admit. It's like confessing the general sin of worry. Similar to worry, however, these three indicate something more serious lurking below the surface. They serve as a dashboard reading for the heart's ability to engage fully with others. Our habit structures are in place for an important purpose: to protect us from the pain that will diminish our personal happiness. So our everyday choices do more than make our days run smoothly; they also keep our hearts from getting too involved with others. It's time to move on to deeper waters, to see why we choose to live so detached and numbed out. Our hearts have much to tell us.

COMFORT CLEANSE

Step 4: Detoxing from Convenience

Pick a day this week to disrupt your cue-routine-reward habit loop for convenience. In the morning, ask God to alert you to how you are insisting that life adhere to your plan. Whenever inconveniences pop up, embrace them and ask God to help you say no to self instead. Write down what happened and what you learned.

Step 5: Detoxing from Safety

Visit erinstraza.com/comfort-detox and follow the link to take the Risk-Taking Test from PsychTests.com. Process your results by working through the following questions:

- As you answered the questions, did you discover anything new about how willing you are to embrace risk?
- Based on the quiz questions, does it seem that your risk aversion is masked as common sense?
- How does having your decision matrix set to safety cause you to dismiss opportunities God may be calling you to embrace?

Ask God to show you where you have become content to stay encamped in the wilderness rather than moving forward in faith to the Promised Land. Is it a relationship? A job? A character flaw? A step of faith? How can you choose to live for more than safety in this area of your life?

Step 6: Detoxing from Perfection

Amy Carroll, author of the book *Breaking Up with Perfect*, has an insightful interview about cutting perfectionistic ties. Visit erinstraza.com/comfort-detox and follow the link to listen to the interview.

Process the power perfection has on you by working through these questions:

- When is the lure of perfection the strongest for you?
- What appeals to you about having a life that others envy?
- What do you lose by trying to project a perfect life?

Identify the main area in which perfection is ruling you. Ask God to help you say goodbye to perfectionistic thinking in that area this week, and write down what happens.

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FINDING FREEDOM FROM
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COMFORT DETOX

Whether we're aware of it or not, our minds, bodies, and souls often seek out what's comfortable. Erin Straza has gone on a journey of self-discovery, awakening to her own inherent drive for a comfort that cannot truly fulfill or satisfy. She depicts her struggles with vulnerability and honesty, and shares stories of other women who are on this same path. Straza also provides practical insights and exercises to help you find freedom from the lure of the comfortable.

"With compassion and conviction, Erin Straza shows us how we can and why we must break the habits that serve self rather than others."

—Karen Swallow Prior, author of *Booked* and *Fierce Convictions*