



RETURNING
TO OUR ROOTS



NO TURNING BACK: TRADING SECURITY FOR TOGETHERNESS

Faith is one foot on the ground, one foot in the air, and
a queasy feeling in the stomach.

—Mother Angelica

It felt as though a ten-pound stone was lodged in the pit of my stomach. I had lost my appetite and sleep was elusive. But there was no going back. We had made up our minds, and I had no doubts that we were making the right decision. What I agonized over was how I would *explain*.

How could I communicate to friends and family why we, twenty-something Floridians with three kids, were putting our darling starter home, with its 1940s charm, on the market? It had been our first house, the house to which we'd brought two of our babies home from the hospital, with a great fenced-in backyard where our kids played. How could we give it up so easily?

How could I explain why Daniel was leaving a stable and secure office job at a prison software company—a job that paid our bills and supported our family yet left him

strangely dissatisfied? We should have been happy. So how was I going to make people understand that we wanted to pursue a different kind of life for our family, and that it entailed Daniel quitting his job to take an internship half-way across the country on a sustainable agriculture training farm that offered only a small monthly stipend?

We were embarking on a journey that would either be the adventure of a lifetime or the most foolish decision of our lives. As we stayed up late discussing plans, it was clear that this was the craziest thing we'd ever done—and we've made our fair share of countercultural decisions. We married after my sophomore year of college at the venerable age of twenty. We converted to Catholicism soon after graduating from our Baptist college. We'd had three of our babies within four years. But this move would take the cake.

We were leaving everything conventional behind and moving to a 650-square-foot apartment on a working farm with no flushing toilets in central Texas, several states away from family. Would anyone understand? Would we be able to support our three young children? Were we crazy even to think about doing this?

Some would surely think we had lost our minds. After all, we had originally moved to Florida after college to be close to our extended family after our first child was born. We knew we needed the extra support. What would happen to us if this new adventure didn't work out? What if we hated farming? What if parenting and homeschooling several states away from our extended family was too much? What if living in such close quarters with all three kids and no free babysitting compliments of grandparents turned out to be more than we could handle? What if potty training a toddler on a compost toilet pushed me to the brink of insanity?

What was so bad about our life as it was, anyway?

I braced myself for those questions and worried about others that might be verbalized about our plan. After all,

there was no denying we were doing something pretty out of the ordinary. And I wasn't wrong about the response. I'll admit to getting some raised eyebrows and even the insinuation that people who can pay their bills are fools to make career changes, no matter how miserable their jobs are. It sure didn't sound very *responsible*. When I announced our plan on my blog, some of the comments were even angry: "How dare you refuse to be satisfied with conventional American life, you entitled millennial?" But I had braced myself for that.

What I wasn't expecting was the overwhelmingly positive response to our news. Over and over emails flew into my inbox from blog readers saying "I wish we could do something like this!" Friends kept admitting they were jealous of our endeavor to lead a simpler life and choose this unconventional path. We realized that we were certainly not the only ones who were discontented with what conventional American culture was offering us.

THE ROOT OF THE PROBLEM

So what was the problem with the life we were living? The truth is that we found ourselves *stuck*. In order to pay our mortgage, utilities, groceries, health insurance, and school loans, Daniel had to work long hours at a job he not only didn't love but also didn't believe in. He would leave the house by seven each morning to sit in front of a computer, testing software for prison systems—systems that don't function in the way we believe is best for society. He'd return home every night at six, just in time for dinner and bedtime, almost completely missing our children's waking hours. It wasn't what we'd envisioned for our family.

Like most families, we wanted to be able to provide for our children and raise them together. Daniel was working more than fifty hours a week, and I was working part-time while homeschooling and raising three young children in order to barely cover our bills with very frugal living: a

small starter home, one vehicle, no cable, cooking at home, only necessary purchases, and buying secondhand. We wondered if working more hours could help us get ahead. At first it made sense. If Daniel worked weekends, he would bring in a bigger paycheck. But it wasn't that simple.

It turns out that working so many hours is actually an *expensive* way to live. Working more hours meant we had less time, so we ended up spending money on services we could otherwise handle ourselves. We quickly blew through our monthly food budget. Instead of spending our time cooking together as a family on a consistent basis, we had no time to meal plan and cook at home. We found ourselves eating out or picking up takeout more often. These extra expenses erased the hard work spent trying to stay afloat, and we had gained neither quality of life nor more family time.

Increasing work hours also results in additional hidden costs in daycare, car payments, fuel, and other expenses that emerge when time is in such short supply. Wrapped up in this endless work cycle, we were working more and seeing each other less, and the increased spending made the increase to our income negligible. Working those extra hours wasn't helping us.

Especially in a post-recession economy, many people aren't working to get ahead—they're just trying to eke out a living for themselves and their families. Maybe you're already living very simply for financial stewardship reasons. Maybe you just feel stuck in the rat race and are exhausted and unsatisfied. There's certainly a catch-22 in the American pursuit of affluence. We work more so we can achieve the dream of having a nice house to enjoy. But working more means we have less time to be at our home enjoying it. We want to provide our children with prosperity but end up depriving them of what they actually need and desire—time with us.

Many of my blog readers expressed this frustration over email. They explained that they had done everything right: gone to the right schools, worked hard, completed the right internships. And they were now working jobs that weren't fulfilling, spending too much time away from their families and often still barely scraping by. They felt trapped and dissatisfied. Maybe you can relate.

We were stuck and looking for a way out. I hated knowing that Daniel was leaving home each day to count down the hours at the office, only to return to us wiped out before the rush of dinner, bath, and bedtime. He looked into other job opportunities, but between a post-recession job market and the high cost of living in Florida, we couldn't figure out how to make it work.

THE PRAYER OF SURRENDER

After months of frustration, instead of continuing to pray for a new job opportunity Daniel started praying for surrender. He pursued contentment and joy in the life we already had, despite its imperfections. He focused on the things he could do to pursue his passion for farming in the here and now: growing veggies in our front yard and caring for our flock of backyard chickens. He read books about farming and homesteading and soaked up all the knowledge he could. We tried to put down some roots and get more involved in our parish. Despite—or perhaps *because* of—his many tattoos, our parish priest asked Daniel to volunteer with the high school youth, and he began regularly serving in that ministry. We began building friendships and tried to be content in our life in Florida.

It was when we stopped trying to force changes in our lives that opportunities started to pop up that made a real change possible. Daniel was offered a paid position in youth ministry at our parish and some of my writing projects started to become more lucrative. After living paycheck to paycheck for our entire married life, we were able to save

a little bit. Maybe this was it—our chance to get unstuck! We still didn't know exactly where we were headed, but we kept our eyes open for the next step.

Then, in 2014, we visited Waco, Texas, where we had gone to college, for a dear friend's wedding. On the long drive back to Florida, all three kids miraculously fell asleep in the van. In the unusual quiet, we started to dream a little bit. I asked Daniel, "What would you want to do if you could do anything—anything at all? What do you think a good life would look like?"

"I'd want to eat three meals a day together as a family. I'd want to spend more time with the kids. And I'd want to do good, honest work that I loved—something like farming."

We both sighed. We knew we were nowhere close to having the resources to purchase land, and we couldn't imagine getting to that point on our current salaries. Then there was the challenge of gaining the knowledge we'd need when we were already maxed out with work. It was a dream that seemed very far away.

Then I had an epiphany. "What about the farm where we used to volunteer in college? The internship at the World Hunger Relief Farm? What if we moved back to Texas, you learned to farm, and we spent a year living and working together—our whole family?"

We decided to pray about it. Moving our whole life across the country for at least a year, not knowing what would happen when the internship was over, was a tall order. But after thinking and praying about it, we decided to apply and see what happened. It was scary to think of doing something so . . . well, crazy. What if we got there and didn't like it? What if it was a disaster? But since we already knew we were unhappy in our current situation and staying put wouldn't solve anything, it was a risk we were willing to take.

THE PRICE OF A DREAM

Giving our family the opportunity to live on a working farm had many draws: space for our kids to explore and roam, educational opportunities for homeschooling aplenty, eating three meals a day together as a family, doing work that we could be proud of at the end of the day, and developing valuable skills. But our decision to apply for the internship wasn't exclusively about a desire to farm. The life we were living was getting us nowhere we wanted to go, and we wanted to remove ourselves from the cyclical model of affluence that stems from the grasping, greedy lies of throwaway culture.

What we truly desired was more time together as a family and work that made us come alive. Maybe the answer to our problems was not more—more money, more hours, more stuff. Maybe the answer was asking for the grace to be contented with *enough* and a willingness to make do with *less*—even if that included no flushing toilets. While it may have sounded a little crazy, our decision to live on the farm for a year made perfect sense.

But quitting jobs in Florida and relocating far away from family was much easier said than done. There were many challenges ahead, not least of which was preparing to put our house on the market for this potential move. We wouldn't hear back about the internship program for a few months, but we couldn't wait that long to start trying to sell our house. We didn't have the financial buffer to be paying our mortgage once Daniel quit his job. Our house needed to sell *before* we left Florida. We took a leap of faith that he would get the internship and called a realtor to talk about what we needed to do to get the ball rolling on the sale. We spent a couple of weeks getting the house show-ready, then took a deep breath and listed it.

There we were with a house on the market and a hope that Daniel's internship application would be accepted. Would the house sell in time? Would the internship come

through, or would we sell our home only to discover that we had nowhere to go? Life felt like one big question mark, and I don't deal with question marks very well.

One morning I was racing around the house, trying to go through boxes of the kids' clothes and decide what to pack and what to donate, helping the six-year-old with his math problems, and making snacks for the toddlers. I realized my heart was racing, and I felt as if I couldn't breathe. I walked to my room and sat down on my bed while the kids played in the living room. I struggled to get air into my lungs. *This must be what a panic attack feels like*, I said to myself. The unknowns were getting to me. My fears and anxieties felt as if they were choking me. *Lord, please don't let this whole thing be a big mistake*, I prayed.

As much as I tried not to worry, I kept imagining a nightmare of everything falling apart and having to explain, "Well, actually we had a lovely little house and could pay our bills until we went crazy and tried to move across the country to a farm with no flushing toilets and now we're just wandering nomads with no idea where to go." In my imaginary scenario of doom, we were homeless, sitting by the side of the road under a hot desert sun, having just run out of water, our children cursing the sky for the misfortune of having such irresponsible idiots as parents. Were we insane? I tried to keep focusing on breathing. I needed to take care of three small children. I needed to not be having a panic attack. I needed to do a thousand things to prepare for this crazy move. My breathing eventually calmed, and my heart stopped racing, but that wasn't the last panic attack I'd have during those stressful months.

I didn't want to change my mind and give up on the plan. I didn't want things to stay as they were. And I really did believe we were moving in the right direction. But not knowing how it would all work out was killing me. I like knowing what each step ahead will look like. I like to be in control. If there's nothing productive I can do, then I still

feel compelled to do *something* (even if that something is just worrying until I induce a panic attack). Admittedly it's not a very helpful attitude. Daniel, on the other hand, has the obnoxiously reasonable perspective that worrying doesn't actually improve any situation. "But aren't you scared we'll be homeless nomads?" I would pester, only to hear him chuckle, "God's always taken care of us. I don't see why he would suddenly stop now."

In addition to the anxiety, the practical aspect of selling the house while homeschooling small children in it was misery. I remember one particularly trying morning of schooling and wrangling my three kids (ages six, three, and one at the time) in the backyard. I had banished them from the house because keeping a home show-ready with small children inside it is an exercise in insanity. No sooner would I finish cleaning the kitchen than I'd turn to find my three-year-old joyfully wiping peanut butter all over the oven while the baby eagerly emptied all of the dresser drawers and laundry hampers, happily scattering their contents around each room.

Our house had been on the market for eleven weeks—eleven weeks I never want to relive. While I'm typically good at mentally moving on to "the next thing," it wasn't easy for me to emotionally detach from our first home. It was the house to which I brought two babies home from the hospital. It was the house where we really found our groove as a family. I told Daniel many times while nursing a baby on the couch as he prepped dinner, "I will never be able to love a house like I love this house." But my sentimentality was about to be tested.

We'd gotten word that Daniel had been accepted into the livestock internship at the World Hunger Relief Farm in Waco, Texas. At least we knew that if we sold our house, we would have somewhere to go (progress!). But we were down to the wire. We needed it to sell, and quickly, or we wouldn't be able to move to the farm. While we waited for