

CHAPTER I

WE ARE ALL STARVING

As a teenager, I lived in the country outside of a small town. Usually the twenty-minute drive home on the quiet two-lane road was uneventful, relaxing, and reflective. But on one particular late night I was driving fast. My old, small, four-cylinder truck was barreling down the highway at ninety-five miles an hour. I turned off my headlights and the road became pitch black. I began to drive through the curves of the road, hugging each turn like a NASCAR driver. My intention wasn't to prove that I was a good driver—my intention was to eventually fly off the side of the road.

I had reached a place where I felt as if my life had no purpose. "What's the point of living?" I wondered. I could blame that moment on a bad breakup, the loss of an important football game, low grades, loneliness, confusion, doubt, fear, or issues at home, but it wasn't just one of those things; it was the culmination of them all weighing on me simultaneously.

Hugging the edge of the road near the ditch, I could feel the gravel beneath my tires. All I had to do was let go of the steering wheel and my truck would take me to a place where

none of those things would burden me any longer. Although it was dark that night and my headlights were turned off, the reflection of the moon cast a faint light in the night sky, on the road in front of me, and on the rows of soybeans on each side.

In the midst of the darkness there was a gleam of light that kept me from letting go. The small amount of light from the sun reflected by the moon was all I needed to see ahead. I got scared and pulled my truck farther onto the road and turned my headlights back on. I wasn't so much afraid to die as I was afraid for my life to end before I found the answers. I knew there had to be more in life, and I had a strong desire to discover what it was.

In that moment, that faint reflection of light was all I needed. It represented a small glimmer of hope inside me that wanted to find meaning. I know now that hope was God. Hope kept me from giving up and led me on a search for the answers I was seeking. Hope can be a small but powerful thing, and it was hope that kept me alive that night.

When I look back, I'm certain that God had his hand on my life.

I eventually made it home. As I lay in bed that night, my heart still pounded and my mind was spinning with thoughts. I began to ask questions directed at an unknown God. I asked why I was still alive and what my purpose was.



The reality is that, despite these moments of questioning the value of my own existence, I was blessed with a wonderful mother and father. I'm honored to have a close relationship with both of them today. However, our life wasn't easy. Like many families, we faced challenges. My parents divorced

when I was eight years old, and it was hard on all of us. Many years later, my mom, dad, sister, and I all acknowledged the trials we went through, but we also saw that God did good things through our hardship.

After the divorce, like many kids, I found myself confused about who I was. I was confused about the meaning of life. I was confused about why I existed. I was confused about God and wondered how he could allow life to be so difficult. I was angry, frustrated, and disappointed that life wasn't ideal. My worldview changed. I rebelled and withdrew from those who loved me most, and I sought comfort in things that didn't love me at all.

I was exposed early to the reality that eventually hits us all—that life is hard, imperfect, and not what we want it to be. I decided that I needed to live life alone, so I closed my heart to others, and I closed my soul to God. The only thing I expected out of life was disappointment.

Oh, I had happy moments and have happy memories, but they were sandwiched between confusion and mistakes, seeking and not finding, fear and doubt.



You and I may go about our search in different ways, but for all of us, the desire for authentic joy is paramount. As much as our bodies desire to breathe, so do our souls long for happiness, and none of us are void of this desire.

I've traveled the planet and met people from all over the world, and it's interesting to discover that what I long for is the same thing someone from another continent wants as well. Why is this? It's because the desire for fulfillment runs deep into our very nature, and we will never be truly happy until

we satisfy it. Written into our hearts is a desire, craving, and longing for fulfillment. We want meaning and a purpose in life.

Jesus offers us the answers to our deepest questions. He says, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life" (Jn 14:6). Christ offers us a new way of living. Through him—the way, the truth, and the life—is the way to true fulfillment.

St. Augustine said, "Where then are these rules written, if not in the book of that light we call the truth? In it is written every just law; from it the law passes into the heart of the man who does justice, not that it migrates into it, but that it places its imprint on it, like a seal on a ring that passes onto wax, without leaving the ring" (quoted in CCC, 1955). St. Augustine was a man who wandered for years in search for meaning. Yet his search wasn't far away. It was woven in his heart and soul—the place where God writes his love and truth in all of us. Augustine speaks of God's nature not only from a theological perspective but also from a personal conversion—an encounter with the Savior. Jesus.

St. Thomas Aquinas framed it this way: "The natural law is nothing other than the light of understanding placed in us by God; through it we know what we must do and what we must avoid. God has given this light or law at the creation" (quoted in CCC, 1955). The desire of our heart, who we are as humans, draws us to discover our purpose.

I've never starved, but there have been times when I've been really hungry. I'm sure you have as well, right? Well, my grandmother always said, "The key to good cooking is waiting till people are really hungry, and then they'll eat just about anything and think it's good." When I'm really hungry, everything seems to taste good.

One night when I was working late, the phone rang around midnight. I answered it quickly, assuming some sort

of emergency was the reason for the call. On the other end was my friend Josh, and I could hear his radio blaring eighties music in the background. I asked him what he was doing, and he said that ever since his wife became pregnant, he made late-night runs to a local fast-food joint to buy her jumbo cups of ice. I asked him if they had an ice machine at their house and he said yes, but she craved this specific type of ice. He knew this because once he tried to disguise a different type of ice and got caught; apparently this was the only ice that satisfied her craving.

Our bodies were created to crave what they need, and not only during pregnancy. These cravings give us an appetite that leads us to find food. When our appetites are triggered by some complex movement of the hormonal system, we crave; and when we crave, we eat; and when we eat, our hunger is satisfied. This process goes on throughout our lives, and most of the time we don't even think about it. Without craving and the urge to eat, we would starve and eventually die.

We may need to be taught what to eat or how to eat, but the simple urge to eat is already there, and our bodies obey it.

Just as we crave food, we also have emotional and spiritual cravings. We crave things such as attention, love, fame, money, success, happiness, fulfillment, and so on. All of our cravings long to be satisfied.

This search to satisfy my cravings was a driving force in my life for too long. My insecurities, stemming from not knowing myself, led me to seek immediate fulfillment in things that left me hungrier than before.

I remember hanging out with some older friends in high school who were partying. At age fourteen, I sat on the tailgate of a truck in the middle of a cornfield chugging down whatever alcohol they gave me. I didn't want to drink—I actually thought getting drunk was dumb—but I wanted to be liked

more than I wanted *not* to drink. I wanted to fit in more than I wanted *not* to chug cheap liquor. And because I didn't like myself, I didn't think anyone else liked me, and I was willing to do almost anything to feel accepted. I was starving to find my worth. I was thirsty to find meaning.

My "friends" left me there that night, and I remember lying in the field wondering if my life had any meaning. In my search to find myself, I lay in a muddy cornfield with more questions than answers. Who was I, where was God, and was happiness even attainable?

Often we believe that our cravings are what they seem on the surface, but in reality they run deep into our being. We may think one thing will satisfy our cravings, yet once we set our eyes on something bigger and better, we look to that instead.

I once had a conversation with a wealthy CEO, who told me that he had purchased eight cars in a two-week span. I asked him if he needed eight cars. He said no, not really. Then I asked why he went on a sudden shopping spree for something he didn't really need. He said that he thought it would satisfy him.

Most of us can't buy eight cars, but imagine some high-dollar but affordable item you like and consider buying eight of them in two weeks; you start to see where he was coming from. He told me that he would drive one of his new cars for two days and end up feeling the same as before, so he would go out and buy another one. After two weeks, he had the fleet of his dreams, but he said his dreams weren't "being fulfilled." He was still craving more!

I've lost count of the number of conversations I've had with people who follow this pattern and are left in the same position, or worse than they were before. Even more are the conversations I've had with individuals who return to the

same things over and over again, hoping that the next time they will get a different result.

A young woman once confessed to me that she couldn't end a bad relationship with a guy she was dating because the emotional and physical intimacy she received in the relationship fed a void in her heart. She filled her craving to be loved with short moments of intimacy from an abusive guy. Her desire to be loved was good and natural, but she chose the wrong thing to satisfy it. Although she had moments of satisfaction, they wore off rapidly, to the point where she wasn't happy at all. Sad and dejected, she was willing to overlook the abuse to have her needs met temporarily—which only caused more pain. Fortunately, she eventually found a way out and now has true fulfillment.



It isn't hard to see the emptiness that lies underneath the surface of our culture. The craving for fame, sex, attention, money, success, and so on only hides what people are really longing for. From a macro view, the world is full of people who are emotionally and spiritually starving. On the micro level, many of my conversations with people center on their malnutrition. What they are feasting on is not only failing to satisfy their deep hunger within but is also actually making them sick. Let's take a look at my acquaintance Walter for an easy example of this phenomenon.

I spend lots of time traveling for work as a speaker, consultant, and life coach. In the process, I've collected many air miles and have developed some habits. On these trips, I spend most of my time meeting with people and trying to be as present and available as possible. There is very little downtime,

and I'm OK with that. When I'm on a plane, I either sleep, catch up on writing, send emails, or get completely lost in a book or movie.

However, there are times when someone will engage me in conversation. One time, I was flying to New York City to speak at a conference and fell asleep. I woke up with about forty-five minutes left on the flight. I had just enough time to work on a few things before arriving. But apparently, my co-passenger, Walter, was eager to talk to someone. He had waited for me to wake up and as soon as I did, he asked me a question.

"Are you coming or going?"

"Kind of both," I said. "I'm coming and going."

Silence.

"Where are you going?" he asked.

"New York City," I said, as politely as possible.

Silence.

"What's taking you to NYC?" he asked.

"Work."

My answers were short because I didn't want to chitchat; however, I was cordial and waited to see if he really wanted to talk. He did.

"What do you do?" he asked.

I told him that I'm a speaker and life coach. Now I'm knee-deep in this conversation, and since turnaround is fair play, I began to fire back, asking him all the questions he asked me. Walter was headed to France, and he was traveling alone with the hope of meeting an old girlfriend he rediscovered on the Internet. (They met long before the Internet existed and lost contact.) He was about sixty-five years old with short gray hair, dressed snappy-casual, tanned, and freshly shaven. He had never married, although he had had a few long-term relationships that "never panned out." There was loneliness in his eyes. He shared with me how he had retired at age forty

after, as he put it, “getting lucky in the commercial real-estate industry.” I was intrigued.

“What have you been doing since forty?” I asked. He said he took up sailing and began traveling around the world by sailboat. He’d seen just about everything in the past twenty-five years.

At this point, I’m not only intrigued but also enthralled by his story. Who doesn’t want to retire at forty and travel around the world without a care?

As I immersed myself in Walter’s story, I didn’t grasp that he was just as intrigued by mine. He dominated me when it came to cash, early retirement, leisurely travel, and a carefree life. Apparently I dominated him when it came to living with purpose, relationships, and faith.

After we told our stories, and there were no more questions, we both went back to what we were doing. I was hoping to finish my work before the plane landed. About five minutes later, I felt a tap on my shoulder. It was Walter, and in an awkward moment he looked at me, his eyes a little watery.

“I’ve never been this vulnerable with anyone before,” he said. I leaned away a little bit but kept eye contact with him, waiting for him to follow up his statement.

“I’ve been retired for years and have traveled the world by land, air, and sea,” he said. “I’ve seen and experienced everything, yet I can’t seem to find the happiness and purpose you speak about. You seem to have found something I want to know more about.”

I thought, *How can it be possible for someone with so much to long for so much more?* Then I realized, he’s human, and his heart longs to be satisfied, just as mine does. Walter continued on to France, but his journey that day led him to find the way, the truth, and the life—Jesus.



We all wish life could be perfect, but it's not. And if it was, we would still search for meaning until we found it. How do we find happiness in the midst of an imperfect world? We all ask this question and go through these struggles in some way and at some point in our lives.

My own quest led me to look for fulfillment in external things. In school, I spent countless hours making people laugh in class instead of paying attention, hoping to be noticed. I went from one girlfriend to the next trying to find fulfillment. I intensely sought meaning in sports. I was obsessed with exercising, and I worried that people didn't like me.

I found things that satisfied me in the moment, but when the temporary fulfillment subsided, I didn't know what to do or where to turn. I was afraid of silence, and I was afraid of solitude (now I crave both), so I filled my life with busyness, noise, living moment to moment.

Momentary happiness is an epidemic in our culture, and I was addicted to it. We are often afraid to carve out space in our lives for deep introspection and contemplation, so we continually try to fill the void with something else. Some of the things we do are harmless, and some are toxic. Either way, satisfying our longings with momentary spurts of happiness gives us superficial consolation and not authentic fulfillment. Things that are external make us feel good, and we can even be applauded for some of them. Accolades and achievement can drive our identity. Then who we are is all about what we do and what we accomplish. Yet how long can those feelings sustain us? I can't be team captain, honor-roll student, and class clown my whole life, can I? I can't keep trying to win the

same titles as an adult that I won as a teen and think they will make me happy.

It's like a jet burning out of fuel—it's a joyride, and the landing can be quick and rough. I've had that feeling—the one where I couldn't go on any longer. When I was a young man, my life looked great from the outside. I was doing well in school. I was successful in sports and had friends and girlfriends. Yet on the inside, my need was huge. I was starving.

Fr. Alfred Delp, who is famous for leading the Catholic resistance to Nazism in Germany, states, "The created being must cry out to some power beyond itself in order to acquire its share of strength; when we realize and acknowledge that our natural powers on their own are inadequate we have taken the first step towards salvation."¹

Not long after attempting to drive my truck off the road, I came to a place where I cried out and took a step to discover God. I began to discover his life, mercy, love, and joy; but I was still fragile.

My adult years lay ahead. Although I began to find truth, I still lacked the deep roots to move forward on solid footing. I started to seek less toxic things, to set positive goals, and I pretended my life was great. I was "sailing around the world" while still searching for fulfillment.

The "less toxic" things are the things that are more difficult to recognize as problems in our life. For example, I was a perfectionist, which meant I accomplished things and did things well—but I really had a fear of failure, and my outward success hid it. This perfectionism allowed me to do good things and accomplish goals I set; yet even this became an obstacle for me.

I enjoyed college and continued my search for happiness there. Like many young adults, I stayed busy and distracted

enough to avoid reality. My faith and my search somehow conflicted. I was lost and found at the same time.

We all eventually land on the question of happiness, because we all want the answer, the key, the formula. We crave happiness more than anything. It's not that we *deserve* happiness, because that signifies that we must earn it and somehow be worthy of it.

The reality is we don't deserve, can't earn, and don't merit happiness because we are *already created* for it. Because we are created for it, we crave happiness, and we will continue to starve until we find it.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. In what ways do you find yourself "starving"?
2. What do you use to satisfy your cravings?
3. What's your goal in life?
4. At this moment, what do you see as your purpose in life?
How are you fulfilled (or unfulfilled)?
5. What is it that you seek? What are you hoping to find?