



CULTIVATE

A Grace-Filled Guide to Growing an Intentional Life



LARA CASEY

Author of Make It Happen

PRAISE FOR *CULTIVATE*

"Cultivate is delightful and breathes grace through every page. Lara gives inspiration to nurture life through the seasons in which we find ourselves. Reading this book will make you feel that you have a personal friend standing by your side to give you encouragement to live your life well."

SALLY CLARKSON

BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *OWN YOUR LIFE*, *THE LIFEGIVING HOME*,
AND *DIFFERENT*

"Cultivate is rich soil for the soul! Whether you are a new sprout, just beginning to brave life in the light; a tender shoot fighting for space among rocks and weeds; or a mature plant in need of nurture and pruning, this book will help you thrive. With her characteristic honesty, humility, and patience, Lara Casey uses her spiritual 'green thumb' to gently nudge us toward an intentional life of godliness and growth. Scriptures and stories from Lara's own spiritual journey inspire us to self-reflection without self-sabotage and progress without perfection. Journal prompts and reflection questions help to demystify the growth process and break it down into manageable steps. If you are ready for a new season of spiritual growth, dig into *Cultivate* and get ready to bloom!"

ELIZABETH LAING THOMPSON

AUTHOR OF *WHEN GOD SAYS "WAIT"*

"Lara's commitment to growth, in both her personal life and in business, has long inspired me. To lead an authentic life, we must look inward for answers. In the pages of *Cultivate*, she candidly shares her triumphs and failures, and her secrets to success for growing a purpose-filled life. What an incredible gift to the world!"

ERIN BENZAKEIN

FARMER-FLORIST AT FLORETFLOWERS.COM
AUTHOR OF *CUT FLOWER GARDEN*

"I loved *Cultivate*. Through these pages, we learn to embrace the season we're in: when to get our hands dirty, when to rest, when to prune, and when to wait. Lara shows us through examples and actionable steps that the best things—whether that's a garden of colorful zinnias or an intentional life focused on what truly matters most—are not created all at once, but through the little-by-little."

| **INDIA HILL**

| TWENTYSOMETHING WRITER AT BOOKSANDBIGHAIR.COM

"Are you exhausted, weary, or worn out from trying to keep it all together? *Cultivate* is a life-giving read that invites you to pause and choose a different path. Lara's authentic voice will encourage you to let go and embrace the messiness of a truly abundant life. You'll be refreshed and ready to step toward an intentional life rooted in what matters most."

| **EMILY ENOCKSON**

| RELUCTANT FARM GIRL AND SERVANT LEADER AT ZACHARIAH'S ACRES

"This book will help you know about God and growing things. I like the part about the butterflies and bees."

| **GRACE ISAACSON**

| AGE 5

CULTIVATE

ALSO BY LARA CASEY

Make It Happen: Surrender Your Fear.

Take the Leap. Live on Purpose.

CULTIVATE

A Grace-Filled Guide to Growing an Intentional Life

LARA CASEY



THOMAS NELSON
Since 1798

For my little gardeners:
Gracie, Joshua, and Sarah

I love you from my head tomatoes.

God lives in every garden,
He loves each growing thing.
Forget your ills,
Get out and dig and sing.

—A WEATHERED SIGN IN MY GRANDFATHER'S GARDEN

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WELCOME TO THE THICK OF IT

Before we get started, you should know something: I am an unlikely gardener. My grandfather could grow tomatoes with his eyes closed, but I never seemed to get it.

For most of my life I craved instant results and quick fixes. I wanted flourishing and full bloom right from the start.

I preferred to skip the in-between part. The sometimes-awkward waiting, tending, and growing part.

So it's no surprise that I've killed a lot of plants in my life.

Several years ago, during a long season of marriage challenges, I bought an orchid for my desk, thinking the colorful blooms would help me feel something other than despair. But within days, my poor little plant was withered and dying.

That orchid represented my life at the time. My soil was dry and depleted, and I desperately needed sustenance.

My husband, Ari, and I met at the gym, back in another lifetime when I was a personal trainer and he was in the navy. We got married five months later in Las Vegas. (Typing that never ceases to make me feel a little shocked at my own story!) We had both gone through painful relationship endings shortly before

we met. Neither of us was in a great place to start a new relationship, much less a serious one. But we fell for each other quickly, and when it came time for him to move to a new base across the country, we had to make a choice: Do we say goodbye or take a huge leap of faith together? We chose the latter and eloped.

When the honeymoon phase ended, reality hit. We come from different faith backgrounds. Our hurried courtship and differences caused a lot of tension in our first years together. We became two ships passing in the night and even started sleeping in separate beds.

I tried to fill my emptiness by throwing myself into building a business. I worked hard trying to grow something that would fill the broken places in my life, trying to prove my worth, hoping that once I did it all, once I had it all, and once I finally got it all done, I would finally feel content.

But having it all done, all together, and checked off never happened. Instead, my feelings of being overwhelmed grew like weeds.

LOOKING GOOD ON THE OUTSIDE

Fixing the root of my emptiness felt completely out of my control, so I tried dozens of surface solutions.

Searching for a more organized life, I bought new planners and pens.

Seeking lasting joy, I loaded my shelves with books that promised formulas for quick-fix happiness.

Maybe getting fit would solve everything, so I purchased running shoes and a gym membership.

Perhaps more creativity would be the thing that brought me contentment, so I loaded up my cart with blank canvases and craft supplies.

I felt emotionally drained, so I reached for comfort food and social media.

I bought a journal, thinking it would help me slow down and be more introspective.

I acquired cookbooks, clothes, subscriptions, and throw pillows.

But I learned that it was going to take a lot more than throw pillows to heal the mess in my heart. No matter how many things I purchased, my life still felt empty.

CULTIVATE IT

Can you relate? What surface solutions have you tried lately?

In rare moments of stillness, when I let myself actually feel what was below the surface instead of running from it, I felt shame.

Shame for being so busy.

Shame for not having close friendships.

Shame for spending long hours at work at the expense of my well-being.

Shame for being the editor-in-chief of a wedding magazine when my own marriage was in ruins.

Shame for withholding my talents, dismissing them as useless since I wasn't an expert.

Shame for the state of my soul.

MAKE A CHOICE

I feel tenderness in sharing this with you. I think back to who I was then, and I feel for her. That Lara didn't know any better. She was trying to make something of her life. She hustled hard, despite often feeling hopeless. She was doing what she thought she had to do: Trying to pay the bills. Trying to hear God's voice in all the noise. Trying not to give up on her marriage. She was trying. But she couldn't see at the time that there was another way forward—a much better way.

If changing your life feels impossible and you're tempted to close this book in search of new throw pillows like I was, take heart. Life *can* change. You can move forward on an entirely new path. And here's the best part: You don't have to do it all, be it all, or check it all off to experience change. You don't have to do any of this on your own, or perfectly, for the course of your life to be radically redirected.

How do I know? My life has been transformed since those hustle-hard days, and my prayer is that these pages—and my story—will help you know and live the truth: no matter how far gone or far away from blooming you feel, new life is possible.

I don't know your current situation or what's going on in your heart, but I know that there is grace—God's transforming gift of new life—for your heartache, your restlessness, and whatever it is that's keeping you from flourishing. There isn't a mess you've made that God can't make into something new and beautiful.

A NEW WAY OF LIVING

Like my life at the time, the orchid on my desk seemed beyond saving. I hid it out of sight in a corner of our bathroom, where

it lived for four years, getting watered maybe once every couple of months. In fact, I almost threw it away.

But one morning I stared at the dying plant and got frustrated—mad, even. I was mad at the emptiness I felt and frustrated that nothing I was doing was working. Sometimes frustration can spur us to action, though, doing things we never thought we would do.

I thought changing the direction of my life would take a monumental effort on my part, like a grand strike of lightning, but for me it was a surprisingly small spark that illuminated a new path.

When anything is exposed by the light, it becomes visible,
for anything that becomes visible is light.

—EPHESIANS 5:13-14

Every fiber of me was tired of feeling like I was constantly fumbling in the dark. I was tired of living in a way that wasn't really living at all.

I was tired of quick fixes that didn't fix anything.

I was tired of living in a state of lack—lack of time, lack of peace, lack of confidence, and lack of meaningful connections with people.

I was tired of working hard but feeling like it wasn't getting me anywhere that mattered.

I needed a new way of living, from the ground up.

When we are faced with something that isn't working, we get two choices: stay where we are, or redirect and consider a new way forward. Staying isn't bad. Waiting can be fruitful. But sometimes we stay where we are because of fear, don't we? I have often wrestled with this. My need for nourishment and

change felt so dire at the time that I was genuinely afraid to consider anything but immediate remedies. How could I wait for water to come when I felt so parched? How could I heal the pain in our marriage in time to save it? It felt too big. Too impossible for me.

I wanted a fast fix, but God wanted my heart. I took a leap of faith to consider a new, outside-of-my-comfort-zone path forward.

What I'm about to tell you may seem elementary, but for me this was a revolutionary mind shift: I thought about the big picture. Where did I want to be when I was eighty years old? What would be important to me then, and what wouldn't? Considering these questions was like someone slowly turning the lights on. I started to see a new way forward. It wasn't a path I had ever taken before, but what I was doing wasn't working. It was time to do the opposite of what I had been doing!

Instead of living for the short term and patching things to just get by, I thought about the long term.

I committed to little-by-little progress instead of the all-at-once.

I started to cultivate.

Starting with my little plant. In my frustration one day, I pulled that orchid out from the dark corner, put it by the light on the windowsill, and started to tend to it. I watered, fertilized, repotted, pruned, and watched my withered orchid for any signs of life. I had no idea what I was doing. It was a haphazard process, but God was changing something in me.

I kept coming back to the little pot on the light-bathed

window sill, despite the perpetually lifeless, brown leaves. They remained unmoved, it seemed, by my visits. But every time I tended to that shell of a plant, watering and tending with expectant hope, God was changing me—opening me to believe in something I couldn't yet see.

BLOOMING LOVE LETTERS FROM GOD

Despite my imperfect care over the course of two years, one morning I saw a flush of green in the orchid's pot. I took the plant outside in the daylight to be sure my eyes weren't deceiving me.

There it was.

My little plant was alive!

That flush of color grew to two hearty, green leaves. Soon after, a stalk emerged—and weeks later, flower buds.

I held the pot in my hands and cried. This wasn't about a plant; this was about my life. I had been addicted to instant gratification, searching for contentment in whatever was easy and fast. But easy and fast didn't bring this plant back to life, nor did my own plans or strength. My orchid had flourished only with careful and consistent tending, little-by-little progress, and trusting God to make it grow in His timing.

The day the flower buds unfurled, I ran around the house in celebration. Where there once had been doubt, hope was now blooming before me in shades of pink and golden yellow.

And you know what's amazing? Right now, as I type this to you, almost a decade later, that same orchid is keeping me company on the dining room table. Its twelve flowers are like little blooming love letters from God.

CULTIVATE IT

What in your life needs to be revived or given a fresh start?

Tending my dried-up orchid over and over again for two years—and seeing God use those little steps to make new life happen—gave me a peek into how He works. There was something to the process of taking small, intentional steps forward, embracing imperfect progress along with oceans of God's grace. I was discovering an essential truth: good things didn't grow all at once but rather little by little.

Little by little, God was changing my life. He was showing me real grace: an invitation to experience new life in my brokenness and undeserved forgiveness in my mess. He transformed my marriage, my well-being, and my soul with this essential grace—not a hall-pass or an excuse for missteps, but my imperfect life exchanged for Jesus' perfect one, my fruitless striving for His life-giving power, my weakness for His strength, and darkness for light.

People often ask me how I stay so motivated and energized. I could tell you I try to eat healthy foods and sleep well at night, but the real answer is grace.

His grace took two people who were going nowhere and set us on a path to somewhere.

That motivates me more than any coffee or accomplishment ever could. And it's this essential grace that gives me the freedom to cultivate—embracing little-by-little, imperfect progress, because I know I don't have to be perfect to grow what matters alongside Him. Grace motivates me to try, to plant, to grow, and to take leaps of faith, not because I have to but because I

want to. His life-giving grace made me a cultivator, right where I was, flaws and all.

I wasn't sure if there was any hope for my parched life. But new life gradually began to grow. Although I had many doubts, I discovered that doubts are doorways. When we lean into our doubts, seeking truth where we feel restless and unsure, God leads us to greater faith, and sometimes to unexpected new paths.

As I will share with you in the pages ahead, that resurrected plant inspired me to start a garden. (Typing those words still blows me away.) As I cultivated my garden, faltering step by step, God taught me how to cultivate an intentional life too—right where I am, in every season.

The lessons I learned in the dirt changed everything for me—my faith, my work, my family, and my future—and the same can happen for you.

EMBRACE THE TENSION

Welcome to the thick of it, where it's beautiful and messy and fueled by grace. Imagine me with you, wherever you are reading this, looking you in the eyes to tell you what I know now: a flourishing life is possible, no perfection required. In fact, it's in the imperfect—the dirt—where things grow. Not despite the mess and tension, but right smack in the middle of it.

In the parts of your life that feel dry, lifeless, and messy.

In your weakness.

In your broken places.

In your hard conversations.

In your fears and failures.

In do-overs and boo-boo kisses.

In I love you and I'm sorry.

In leaning into what feels unkempt.

In deciding that done is good enough.

Even in that thing that you haven't told a soul, that feels too ugly and painful to admit.

I'm learning that there is magic in the middle ground. There's good stuff for us in the tension of the in-between. Growth happens in the wait.

In what feels awkward and unbalanced, growth and life are happening.

I'm still in the thick of it most days. I'm imperfect, yet I'm cultivating an intentional life.

And I know God isn't done with me yet.

BECOME A CULTIVATOR

Mankind's first job was to cultivate and keep a garden (Gen. 2:15). God could have given us any number of tasks to do or places to be, but He is the author of intentionality. This first assignment was a meaningful foundation. Perhaps He put us in the garden to teach us something essential.

The Hebrew word used for "cultivate" in Genesis is the same word translated "serve" in Joshua 24:15: "As for me and my house, we will serve the LORD." Cultivating an intentional life is about serving the Lord for His purposes and growing what matters with Him.

CULTIVATE IT

One of the following definitions of *cultivate* may stand out to

you more than the others. Circle or underline words or phrases that jump out to you most.

To *cultivate* means to

- serve,
- nurture,
- nourish,
- prepare,
- encourage,
- improve,
- refine,
- pay attention,
- foster growth,
- loosen and break up hard ground, and
- care for what you've been given.

What words or phrases stood out to you most in that list? *Pay attention* leaped off the page at me. In the dark days of my marriage, I had been paying attention to things that didn't matter, giving them importance with the currency of my heart and time. But why?

DO YOU NEGLECT OR NURTURE?

So often we want to cultivate an intentional life, but something is in the way. What do you feel has been holding you back lately?

CULTIVATE IT

Mark the words that grab you most in the following list.

The opposite of cultivating is

- abandoning,
- neglecting,
- disorganizing,
- destroying, or
- ignoring.

As I looked over the words in this list, *neglecting* hit me hard. That's exactly what I had been doing in my life. I had neglected my marriage, my well-being, my relationships, and my soul because they seemed too hard to fix with my own strength. Making a purchase? I could do that. Replying to e-mails? I could do that. Dreaming up projects that would help grow my business? Yes, I could do that. But mending my heart, pulling my soul out of the pit, and finding time for rest? Those things felt out of my control. I nurtured only what I thought I could control.

CULTIVATE IT

What areas of your life feel neglected?

What have you been choosing to nurture instead, and why?

Sometimes choosing a new path, or one that requires great faith, isn't easy. Maybe it's hard to imagine living a different way in your current circumstances. But what if doing the hard thing, taking a risk, or stepping into the uncomfortable will change everything? What if giving up something will open space for something much better? Cultivating what matters is worth every bit of what we give up in time, pride, money, possessions, status, or comfort.

I have to pause here to tell you something: I don't know your story or where these words will meet you, but as I write these pages, I am praying for you. Maybe we know each other in real life, or maybe we don't yet, but we share something: we want to do this life well. And perhaps you are beginning to realize, as I did, there's some junk in the way, such as fear, bitterness, worry, or a pull toward wanting instant gratification and quick fixes. You are wondering when you will finally feel like you're really *living*.

I am fighting tears as I type this, because I needed someone to pray for me during those uncultivated days. I felt alone. I didn't know how to ask for prayer or where to start. My faith felt broken and distant and imperfect. I needed something bigger than I am to help untangle the mess and give me a fresh start. I needed a way to sift through all the things to get to the only thing that matters: His truth.

REPLACE LIES WITH TRUTH

In the pages that follow, we are going to uncover ten common lies that keep us from flourishing:

Lie #1: I have to do it all.

Lie #2: I have to be perfect.

Lie #3: My life needs to look like everyone else's.

Lie #4: It's impossible to start fresh or move forward.

Lie #5: I have to know all the details of the path ahead.

Lie #6: Waiting is not good or productive.

Lie #7: Small steps don't make a difference.

Lie #8: I will be content when I have it all.

Lie #9: I can do life by myself.

Lie #10: The past isn't valuable; it's all about the future.

CULTIVATE IT

Which of these lies above have you caught yourself believing?
Circle the lie(s) that stand out to you.

What other lies are holding you back from cultivating an intentional life? (Examples include: *I'm not good enough*; *It's too late for anything to change*; etc.)

As we break up these lies and replace them with truths, good things will have fresh, new space to grow in your life. Are you ready to dig in? I am!

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

This is not a reading-only book. Just as gardens don't grow simply by thinking about them, cultivating an intentional life takes some digging and doing.

Gardening requires lots of water—most of it in the form of perspiration.

—LOU ERICKSON

Write It

As you read these pages, I encourage you to journal your thoughts in the margins and in the “Cultivate It” prompts. If the word *journal* makes you cringe a little, you’re in good company. I don’t love journaling either, but I do love the feeling of getting tangled thoughts out of my head so I can create margin for the meaningful.

Your “journaling” can be half sentences, chicken scratch, or just a jumble of words. My handwriting is as all over the place as my thoughts are, so my journaling looks . . . well, messy! Practice getting your hands dirty as you interact with this content and respond to the “Cultivate It” prompts throughout each chapter.

Dig In

Each prompt and question in these pages gives you a choice: choose to keep living the lie or choose to break it up and dig into truth. That’s going to take some muscle. Tilling the hard ground of winter in my garden each year leaves me sore the next morning—a good kind of sore that reminds me I woke up some muscles that had been dormant and made some progress in that dirt. New growth can come because I broke up the hard ground. The act of digging into what feels messy or broken may feel challenging or uncomfortable, but it’s necessary to grow new things. The hard work of cultivating will be worth it!

Cultivating means embracing what feels awkward and undone. When you feel stuck or pressured to have the perfect answer to a question in this book or take the perfect step forward based on what you are learning, stop and remember: make a mess, and dig into what feels imperfect! It's okay to start your answers with, "I'm not sure, but here's an idea . . ." It's okay to try something that doesn't work the first time. It's okay to change your mind, pull out something that's not growing well, and start fresh again. Embracing the imperfect is essential to growing what matters.

Grow at Your Own Pace

If you follow @GraciesGarden on Instagram, you know my favorite flowers to grow are zinnias. They take a few weeks to reach full bloom, but they flower from May all the way until the first freeze in November. The days of waiting are worth the months of flowering. So take a lesson from my zinnias, and go at your own pace as you work through each "Cultivate It" prompt. Getting through each one might take some time and thought—that's okay! Slow growth is still growth. Get started today and focus on little-by-little progress, not perfection. The process will be worth it.

You have the freedom to skip the questions and prompts altogether, pick a few that stand out to you, or do them all as you go through these pages. They are just suggestions, like seeds from me to you, to try planting. If you feel overwhelmed or rushed or tense, be curious. Notice how you feel as you are challenged to go outside of your comfort zone and answer each question. Know that an intentional life isn't grown from what you do but rather by whose you are. God is with you right now and as you dig into each question.

Cultivate Together

I've created a special Cultivate Together Guide in the back of this book—a ten-week discussion guide that will equip you to cultivate what matters and grow in community. Grab your girlfriends or small group, and dig in together.

Grow with Grace

You don't have to actually grow plants as you go through this guide, but if you want to, you'll find a Cultivate Gardening 101 Guide at LaraCasey.com/cultivate. Fair warning: I've learned a thing or two about growing things over the years, but I'm no expert. Please reference page 77, "Grace from the Garden: All the Plants I've Killed," for proof.

The subtitle of this book has the word *grace* in it for a reason. No matter what mistakes you've made or will make, you don't have to rely on your own strength to grow this life. You don't have to be perfect or have it all together. God has it, and His abundant grace is yours for the taking.

IT'S TIME TO CULTIVATE

My words may be imperfect as we go through this work together, but I hope they give you the freedom to know that your words, and your life, don't have to be perfect either. I've been given a story to tell—and live—and so have you.

Let's do this.

It's time for the dry, forgotten places to be transformed.

It's time to break up the hard ground and to prepare for new growth.

It's time to embrace the mess and cultivate an intentional life.

PART 1

.....

PREPARE YOUR GARDEN

CHAPTER 1

.....

CULTIVATE WHAT MATTERS

LIE: I have to do it all.

TRUTH: I can't do it all and do it well.

I almost ran into a wall—a literal wall in my own home.

I had just had a new baby, and I struggled with balancing motherhood and business. I worried that my growing company couldn't withstand the changes that were happening in my personal life. I feared that everything would fall apart.

I felt pressure to keep it together.

I thought that everyone else had it together but me.

I believed that I had to get it all done—and done perfectly.

And, despite my efforts, the only thing that felt done was me.

Rushing to get back to my desk one morning, with a baby in one arm and reading an e-mail on my phone on the way, I came *this* close to crashing my face right into a lovely shade of Benjamin Moore's "Mindful Grey."

That wall was a wake-up call. I was trying to get it all done

out of fear. And it felt painfully familiar. I had grown so much since my hustle-hard days years ago, but I found myself believing similar lies—the lies that said I had to do everything and do it all perfectly. Everything felt urgent, important, and necessary. I settled back at my desk, took a breath, and considered something I didn't want to admit: maybe all the things I thought I had to do didn't actually need to get done.

IDENTIFY WHAT YOU WANT TO CULTIVATE

Maybe you want your life to transform, but you don't know where to start. One surefire way to stay right where you are is to stay right where you are. Even if what we're about to do together feels challenging, let's do this in the name of not staying where we are. Ready?

As we begin this journey together, name the one thing that you most want to change or grow in your life. You can change or refine your answer later, but let's mark our start together.

What do you want to cultivate? As you read this right now, what's the first thing that comes to mind?

CULTIVATE IT

Below is a list of some ideas to get you started thinking about what you want to cultivate in your life. Circle the ones that fit you best, or write your own. Practice making a mess by defining your thoughts as they are right now, even if they feel imperfect or impossible.

Perhaps you want to cultivate

- A healthier lifestyle
- A stronger marriage
- A deeper faith
- Intentional connections with family
- Joy in your children
- Contentment in what you have
- More time in prayer
- Learning and education
- A new business venture
- Being more present
- Deeper friendships
- Confidence in your life path
- Creativity
- Work that allows you to use your gifts
- A life-giving home with open doors for hospitality
- Balance and rest
- _____

CULTIVATE IT

Look at the items you circled or wrote. Envision what your life would be like if you grew those things. In the margin, jot down a few words about how cultivating these things would make you, and those around you, feel.

Almost running into that wall made me want to grow breathing space—deep and wide breathing space. I had too much to do

and care for. I was still trying to do all I had done before this new season of my life, but it was too much. I needed a shift.

I wanted to unrush my pace in favor of presence.

Imagine planting a peaceful garden in the middle of everything you have going on right now, right where you are. The image of a well-tended garden is a stark contrast to how we live most days, isn't it? But it's possible. In the middle of the chaos and pressure all around you, let the story I'm about to share with you give you real hope that you can cultivate a new way of thinking, being, dreaming, and doing—right where you are.

It's winter as I begin this book, and my garden beds are mostly bare except for the kale and cabbage that don't mind the cold. I still can't believe this garden is mine and that I grow things. As of this writing, this is my fifth year having a garden. *Me*. The former plant killer and dirt dodger. Every time I step out into the dirt, I'm reminded that God is the author of change. He can change anyone and anything. He has proven that time and time again in my life.

DECIDING TO START A GARDEN

So how did I go from one withered orchid to a tiny suburban farm? The way many good things grow: imperfectly.

When I was young, my Grandpa Cecil loved taking me to his vegetable garden. I'd hunt for roly-polies and snails and help him pull turnips. I spent a lot of time with my grandpa in his garden. I just wanted to be with him. You see, something about Cecil was magnetic. He had a joy and contentment that drew people in. He had been through a lot in his life, including multiple heart surgeries, great loss, and illness, but his faith

rarely wavered. He knew that he couldn't take any thing or accolade or dollar bill to heaven with him, so he invested in what would last—loving God and planting good seeds in people's lives, including mine.

Sometimes God uses another person to plant a seed in our lives. And sometimes that seed doesn't sprout till decades later—right on time. I wanted to cultivate an intentional life, like Grandpa Cecil's.

As my little orchid bloomed, the rest of my life was revived too. What felt impossible happened: my marriage changed. My husband, Ari, and I went from constant turmoil and chasing all the wrong things to being given new life by God's grace. Being forgiven of the hurt we had caused each other and the mistakes we had made was unfathomable, incomprehensible, and clearly happened by the power of a very real God. We named our daughter Grace, for the gift we had been given. My wedding magazine company changed right along with my life, and we began to help couples plan not just weddings but also meaningful beginnings to married life. Our small group at church became a significant part of our lives as Ari and I grew in our faith. Ari started a new job as an assistant professor at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and we began to figure out parenthood together.

There's something about being a new parent that puts life in perspective quickly. I began questioning the way I was doing everything. How could I teach our daughter to do life well? How would the way I care for what I've been given teach her to do the same? How could I teach her that God can change what feels impossible, like He did with our marriage?

If I wanted Grace to live an intentional life, I was going to have to live one myself. That thought was overwhelming. Even though so much had changed in our lives, there was much more

I knew God wanted to grow in me. The most powerful teaching I could do with Grace would come from my own in-progress example.

I wanted to plant roots, create memories through meaningful traditions, and teach Grace about living with all five senses—living outdoors in God’s creation in the same way I did as a kid. I wanted to teach her how to grow, tend, harvest, and savor the things that matter.

I did something that felt a little wild, and yet so right, and I bought a few plants: basil, oregano, and rosemary to season family meals with. I put the pots on the back steps, and Grace quickly took an interest in them. She visited them each day to smell their leaves and munch on the basil, bringing me a sprig or ten as I cooked dinner each night. Adding these plants to our family was oddly thrilling at the time. *I* bought plants. I was up to a total of five live things to tend to now: my orchid, three pots of herbs, Grace, and Ari.

But something in me craved more. I thought about Grandpa Cecil. Reflecting on his faithful, simple, content life, I got this crazy idea that I wanted to plant a garden in our side yard. I envisioned picking tomatoes from the garden for dinner and letting Grace experience the joy of growing our own fruits and vegetables. I convinced Ari of my new hobby by promising him fresh pesto and pickles. But there was far more that the garden would give us than edibles.

GARDENING WITH GRACE

Now, let’s rewind a few pages and remember that I never thought I would be a gardener. I didn’t know the first thing

about gardening! A houseplant was one thing, but starting a garden was, for me, like a cow moseying around in a parking lot: unlikely. Gardening seemed like a gentle hobby for those who had more time on their hands. Yet here's a sentence I never thought I'd type, much less live: God was transforming a plant killer like me into a gardener.

Gardening was not a hobby I randomly picked out of thin air; it was a craving. As my life was being changed by God's grace, my hands followed. I began to feel an insatiable desire to nurture what I had been given—and even more than that, to grow things I never had imagined wanting to grow!

CHOOSING FEAR OVER FAITH

That next Saturday morning, I decided to get my garden growing. I stood in the yard and opened a pack of yellow pear tomato seeds.

As I unsealed the packet, I steadied my hands. If you've ever enjoyed an heirloom tomato in the summer, you may have noticed the seeds. They are tiny and delicate. I reached into the packet and touched one with my pointer finger. It grasped on to me, as if I now held some responsibility for its life. I could choose to cultivate it or let it remain dormant.

Inside a seed is something powerful: potential. And potential is scary, isn't it? It calls us to grow—to take action, to become, and to step forward in faith.

Lifting the fragile seed carefully out of the packet, my breathing slowed.

Planting seeds is risky. It's putting our trust in something bigger than we are. It's optimism and faith. It requires letting

go, and I don't like letting go. I like being in control. I like efficiency, security, routine, and predictability. I like having a plan.

As I looked down at the seeds, I knew I held possibility in my hands.

What do I do now? How do I plant this? When is the right time to plant tomatoes? How deep in the soil do I plant them? How much should I water them? How many seeds do I plant at once? What if I don't do this perfectly and it doesn't grow?

I had a choice: risk imperfect progress to grow new life or regret not growing anything at all.

In that moment, faced with the possibilities in a tiny tomato seed, I chose fear over faith.

Yes, you read that right.

I flicked the seed off my finger back into the packet and sealed it up.

GARDENING IN WHITE PANTS

I was too afraid to plant anything from seeds at first. I feared I would mess up and everything in my garden would die. And I believed the lie that if I couldn't do it perfectly, I wasn't going to do it at all.

I was conditioned to think that messes were bad and doing it perfectly the first time was good. To me, there was no in-between.

We don't like imperfect starts, do we?

We want perfect right out of the gate.

But all plants grow through the dirt, and so do we. Making a mess doesn't mean you become one.

CULTIVATE IT

What have you been wanting to do or start, but you have been afraid of trying?

What are your fears?

Trying to cultivate an intentional life without making a mess at times is like trying to garden in white pants. I've done this—stepping out into the tomato vines, thinking I'll just pick a few things, prune a couple of rogue vines, and somehow walk away dirtless. But keeping my white pants clean isn't possible when pruning “the Bobs,” as we call our tomatoes (thank you, VeggieTales). That doesn't ever happen, no matter how hard I try.

And you know what? When I'm focused on keeping my white pants dirt-free, I end up missing the joy in what the garden calls me to: being fully present right where I am. Hands, heart, mind, feet—all of me present. Embracing the imperfection gives me undistracted hands, unafraid of getting dirty and doing hard work.

The garden begs for my presence, and when I give it, it grows.

CULTIVATE IT

Have you ever felt as if you were so focused on not messing up that you missed the joy of being fully present at that moment? If so, describe the situation.

I WANT IT ALL

After my fearful encounter with the tomato seeds, I decided to try a different route to gardening.

This time I sought some help from my gardener friend Scott. I went to Scott's nursery, For Garden's Sake, and picked out seedlings instead of seeds. I chose several varieties of tomatoes and basil, dreaming of ripe tomatoes with fragrant sweet basil. And then I saw the peppers. *I love peppers!* And cucumbers, squash, melons, sweet potatoes, carrots, figs, and a beautiful Elberta peach tree. I remembered that my mom had taken us on many road trips through Elberta, Alabama, when I was a kid to get the sweetest peaches I've ever tasted. *I have to get the peach tree. And Grace would love fun herbs like pineapple sage and chocolate mint!*

"You may not have room for all of these, Lara," Scott warned as he eyed the tree and everything I had packed into my wheelbarrow. I didn't see the problem and told him I would try to fit it all in.

If I was going to do this, I wanted to do it big. I wanted the perfect garden—overflowing with all of my favorite things. I wanted the best, the biggest, and a grand start.

You probably know where this is going.

That first year of gardening, I learned a lot of lessons, as I am apt to do: the hard way. I spent that summer pruning and picking and getting a crash course in many things, including "Don't Plant Too Much in Your Garden."

I planted five different varieties of tomatoes. They grew, but they were pretty tasteless. I learned that if you grow tomato vines too close together, their roots get tangled and they start to suck the life out of each other. They needed more room in order to flourish.

If you look at someone's garden, you can tell a lot about that person. I tend to think I can handle a lot more than I actually can.

CULTIVATE IT

Do you tend to believe you can handle more than you actually can? If so, write out a few thoughts about times you've experienced this, and what happened.

THE POWER OF NO

The spring I started my garden, I was speaking at conferences, traveling, running two businesses, and consulting for small business owners while caring for Grace. I was doing good and purposeful work, but too much of a good thing can still be too much.

I was addicted to yes.

Yes, I'd love to do this project with you!

Yes, I'd be happy to write a post for your blog!

Yes, I'd love to speak at your conference!

Yes, I'd love to get together!

Yes, I'll be there!

Yes!

Come summer, I was burned out. I was tired of growing. I was worn-out trying to do it all and not doing a whole lot well.

I was tired of my overcrowded life.

I craved margin in my schedule. Time to teach Grace all the things I had hoped to teach her: A balance of meaningful work and nourishing rest. Room for physical, emotional, and spiritual self-care in order to better care for others.

I wanted to flourish as a friend, a mother, and a wife.

Something had to change, but how was I supposed to make changes when everything was already in motion?

It's simple gardening math: plants need space for roots to grow, and they need adequate nutrients. If you want them to flourish, then give them these things.

Untangling our lives can feel more complicated, though. Relationships, expectations of others, deadlines, and dates press on us and feel impossible to unravel and unrush.

So how do you do it? How do you know what to say no to when it *all* feels urgent? How do you simplify?

A powerful fertilizer to nourish the things that truly matter in life is the word *no*. We often think of *no* as a scary and disconnecting word, but it has the power to be one of the most loving and connecting words you use.

It's okay to let go, not keep up, and not do it all.

It's okay to disappoint people in favor of growing what God has given you to grow.

It's okay to say no.

We have only so much space, energy, and nutrients in our lives. I don't know about you, but I do not thrive in an overcrowded life. Whether it's too many dreams planted at once or too many social commitments, work projects, family activities, or unresolved conflicts, all those things take up space.

When I try to do it all, nothing grows well.

CULTIVATE IT

What in your life needs more room to flourish? What thing(s) could you say no to or spend less time on in order to make room?

What fears or concerns do you have about saying no to those things?

There are inevitable shifts in our lives that require making room—such as a new baby, growth in a business, an illness, or changing life responsibilities. We only have a finite amount of energy, resources, and time to spend each day. When life shifts, no matter the reason, we must be willing to surrender something to make room. This is not easy, is it? But it's necessary. This is why I almost ran into that wall. I didn't want to change. I didn't want to let go at the time. I thought everything would fall apart if I didn't keep it all together. And I sat at my desk that day and I felt guilty. I felt like a bad mom and a bad business owner. I just couldn't do it all. But I've learned since then that there is no guilt needed when times of overload press in; there's just grace and an opportunity to shift. When life changes, which it often will as we grow, something has to shift, or overload occurs. If we resist the change, our lives resist us until we let go.

Pray with me:

God, help us to know when You want us to say no and what we need to let go of in order to make room for Your good fruit to grow in our lives, amen.

MAKE ROOM FOR GOOD FRUIT

Good fruit is characterized by love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Gal.

5:22–23). But here’s the thing we often miss: a life aimed at any one of these virtues will leave you chasing your tail because seeking to obtain the fruit of the Spirit isn’t the goal. Cultivating a meaningful life with God is the goal, and the fruit is the result. In order to live a truly fruitful life, we must seek God above all else. He is the Master Gardener who makes our lives fruitful.

The righteous flourish like the palm tree
and grow like a cedar in Lebanon.

They are planted in the house of the LORD;
they flourish in the courts of our God.

—PSALM 92:12–13

Think about your life and honestly evaluate how you are spending your time, energy, and focus. Are there areas of your life or activities that you know you need to let God heal, change, or strengthen to become fruitful?

CULTIVATE IT

Below is a list of areas in which we usually invest our time and hearts. Feel free to tailor the categories to fit your life. Give each category a rating between 1 and 10. A rating of 1 means this area is not fruitful at all and you wish for this area to change dramatically. A rating of 10 means you are seeing God’s fruit in this area of your life.

Friends/Family

Money

Career

Spiritual Life

Health

Environment

Recreation

Relationship with a significant other

Circle the area above that needs the most changing.

Now write out some of the activities you do in each of these areas of your life and if they are helping you cultivate what matters. What specifically in each of these areas is fruitless?

Every decision we make points us in one direction or the other. The things we set our focus on can give us life or suck it out of us. We can waste our time, talents, energy, and resources, or we can ask God to help us cultivate. When we choose the latter, we open up space for His good fruit to grow.

Look at the fruitless distractions and activities on your list, then call them what they are: weeds. Weeds drain the nutrients and life out of what you want to grow.

Weeds can be tricky, though, because you can't just lop them off on the surface of the soil—you have to pull them out from the roots. If you don't, they will come back in multiples. Maybe the roots of what's keeping your life from producing fruit can be pulled out rather easily, or maybe they run deep. I've had to take a shovel to some unruly crabgrass that tried to take up residence in my rutabagas. Perhaps there is something that you need to turn over to God to heal like unresolved conflict, unhealthy habits, or a broken heart. Or maybe there's something in your schedule you need to let go of. Yes, I believe in finishing what you start if the Lord tells you to, but maybe

He's trying to tell you that that project, activity, or pursuit served its purpose, and now it's time to move forward. Maybe it's time to let go of something. When we say no to one thing, we're saying yes to something else. Maybe your creative gifts don't have to be turned into a business; they just need to be used. Or maybe you should finally make room in your life to do that thing you've always wanted to do, because it's going to prepare you for what's next. And maybe what's next is really good!

CULTIVATE IT

Looking over all you have identified so far, what is one weed that you know you need to pull?

You may have a lot of weeds on your list, but gardening teaches us an essential life skill: doing one thing at a time. I cannot multitask in the garden. Each task requires both hands and my full attention—especially weeding. Starting with just one weed will give you courage and momentum to get rid of many more. Weeds are bound to pop up, but cultivators learn over time how to deal with them swiftly and effectively. Choose one distraction you will pull, one activity you will say no to, or something that needs to end, starting now.

Whatever you need to pull out of your life to give your everything to God, don't waste another second. But there is such a thing as overpruning. As you pull the weeds and prune your time, remember that true faith in God is about a relationship, not about rules. It's easy to look at our lives and see all the things we perceive we are doing wrong, prune those out, and

miss the point. We can be so focused on creating a weed-free garden that we miss the big picture: the garden itself. When I do this, I live out of a place of restriction, rather than flourishing in grace and freedom.

CHOOSE CULTIVATING OVER KEEPING UP

Gracie loves being outside. She collects sticks and makes castles, draws in the dirt, and sifts through rocks and garden treasures. One afternoon she was happily playing putt-putt with pebbles and fallen birch branches. I stood in the yard with her, and I felt the familiar pull of my hand reaching into my pocket for my phone—as if my hand were magnetized to it. It was almost mindless, a muscle memory from trying to get ahead in every moment I could. But I stopped myself. This trying-to-do-it-all compulsion was sucking the life out of me, and it was time to pull that weed right out of the ground. I pulled my hand out of my pocket and reached for the twig I had just stepped on instead.

“Grace, I found another stick—a really good one!” You would have thought I had found an ice-cream-cone tree, she was so excited. I went over to her, got down on my knees in the dirt, and had more fun with sticks than I can express to you. It was a joy that comes from trusting God’s ways over our own, in the seemingly small things and the big things too. Good fruit began to sprout.

There will always be weeds, and there is also always a way to grow what matters. An intentional life is made of not a perfect string of decisions and weed-free living but of a garden grown for His glory, no matter how many times you mess up

or how many times those weeds pop up along the way. Now, don't look too into this next sentence as a metaphor, but in my garden, having lots of weeds just means you've got some good, desirable soil!

God was opening my eyes to see the weeds that had popped up almost without me noticing, as weeds are known to do. I realized how precious and fleeting my time was with Grace, and how unimportant many things were that were getting more of my attention at the time. And I made a decision: no more. I'm willing to disappoint people, delay answering messages, fall behind on e-mail, and let go of perfection in favor of cultivating a lasting love and connection with my daughter.

I choose cultivating over keeping up.

DO WHAT MATTERS

I had, indeed, started a garden. Or, rather, it had started me. The lessons I learned in the dirt seized me whole.

I still can't do it all, but now I don't want to. I just want to do what matters, no matter how many times I stumble along the way. The cultivated life—broken and imperfect—is far more meaningful.

Cultivators pay attention to WHAT MATTERS.

SEEDS OF GRACE AND TRUTH

.....

We can't do it all and do it well.

CULTIVATE WHAT MATTERS

A powerful fertilizer to nourish the things
that truly matter in life is the word *no*.

Too much of a good thing can still be too much.

God is the Master Gardener who makes our lives fruitful.

You don't have to do it all. If unrushing your
life feels overwhelming or impossible, consider
that it *is* impossible for you. That's why we need
God. Where you can't, He already has.

Choose cultivating over keeping up.



GRACE FROM THE GARDEN

Garden Company

Gardening boring? Never! It has surprise, tragedy, startling developments—a soap opera growing out of the ground.

—PAUL FLEISCHMAN, *SEEDFOLKS*

Gracie's Garden began as three pots of herbs—just enough rosemary, basil, and oregano to cook with. As Gracie grew, so did our garden space. Three pots turned to two small raised beds. The next year we pulled out three holly hedges, and our garden grew to seven raised beds.

Along with the expanded space came some new friends. We have lots of company in the garden. Let me introduce you.

First up: Nutty the Squirrel, also known as Señor Pumpkin Eater. Nutty has become fodder for many a bedtime story around our house, but he isn't something of fairy tales. He is a very real, seedling-loving, exceptionally sneaky eastern gray squirrel. I imagine he lives a life similar to the furry friends in Nancy Rose's *The Secret Life of Squirrels*.

Hootie, our plastic guard owl, is up next. His bright yellow eyes are beady enough to fend off most humans, but Nutty

goes right on noshing on our pumpkin seedlings. Hootie has been known to escape his post and, thanks to Gracie, find new places to guard inside the walls of our home. One particular winter morning Ari and I woke up and opened our eyes—and there was Hootie on our dresser, staring at us in bed! Hootie has since been banished from the house.

The “magic trio”—the goldfinches, butterflies, and bees—love to play on my zinnias in the summer, like kids in the sprinklers. I love them so much. They flutter about together in harmony, taking turns harvesting their pick of seeds, nectar, or pollen. They are the reason I pack in as many flower seeds as I can!

Then there is our little brown bunny. Her favorite breakfast is the sweet potato vines, which is fine with us, since the sweet potato vines are as plentiful as fried chicken at a church picnic. She faithfully comes to eat at seven thirty each morning in the warmer months. But there was one night—oh, what a rough night. I pulled in the driveway after dinner out with the family, saw a flash of a little brown creature in front of the car, and heard a *thump*. I turned off the ignition and burst into tears. *My little bunny!* I leaped out of the car and ran into the house. I couldn’t bear the thought of what I’d just done. Ari consoled me and offered to go check and see if the bunny was still under the car. I cried and cried as he went to check. He didn’t see any sign of her. I assumed she’d hopped off, limping from her injury. I was sad for days. Devastated. Then, one morning, guess who hopped out from the blueberry bushes, with no signs of injury? Yep, our little bunny! I cried again. This is admittedly a bit embarrassing to share. I obviously inherited my mom’s compassion for animals. I know our bunny did not literally die and come back to life, but in my mind she did. She reminds

me to tread carefully in our driveway and to believe in positive possibilities.

A favorite friend in the garden is our neighbor's cat, Ranger. He lives up to his name, keeping the garden protected from the critters that try to dig in it. The sight of his black-and-white-spotted fur darting out of the bushes to greet Grace every morning makes me very grateful. They have become quite good buddies. She tucks flowers in his collar, and he doesn't mind one bit. He brings Grace lizards and frogs as tokens of his affection. Gracie isn't so sure about his gifts, but Ranger is good company and she loves him all the same.

There is another garden companion I dare not mention, lest they decide to return. But for the sake of you getting a full picture of what Gracie's Garden is like, here you go: hornworms. Don't Google *hornworms* unless you are ready to be as grossed out as I was when I first saw them on a half-eaten tomato plant. These bright green caterpillars are hungry! They can grow up to five inches long and can consume an entire tomato plant in a week. The only way to get rid of them naturally is to pick them off by hand or purchase a swarm of parasitic wasps. Yes, I did look up how to acquire a band of mail-order wasps once. I couldn't do that to our mailman, Walter, though, so hand-picking it is! I love Gracie's Garden. I do not so much love the hornworms.

While we do try our best to ward off certain pests, we have learned to embrace the company we keep in the garden. The best kinds of gardens are cultivated not for the gardener alone but also for all who wander in. We now know to plant a few extra pumpkin seeds for Nutty and a bevy of wildflowers for the magical trio, and we don't bother to trim the sweet potato vines because of our sweet bunny.

GRACE FROM THE GARDEN

When we cultivate an intentional life, we have plenty to share. We learn to share, not out of our excess but to purposefully grow things to bless others. We even let the hornworms munch a bit on the tomatoes.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I'm so GRATEFUL!

It's a humbling thing to write a book about the very thing you've experienced while writing it—imperfect progress. Debbie, thank you for your faith, patience, and prayerful support as I wrote and lived out these pages over the last two years. Jennifer and the entire Thomas Nelson team—Meaghan, Lori, Kristi, Jesse, Judy, Kimberly, and Laura—thank you for helping to cultivate *Cultivate*.

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Mom, Dad, and Stephen, who would have ever thought I'd write a book about gardening? I am so grateful for our family, for Grandpa Cecil and Grandma Bunny, and for all of our trips to Peach Park. And extra-special thanks to you, Mom, for all you planted in our garden and sowed lovingly into our lives.

Ari, this has been my favorite year with you. Thank you for your unwavering faith, for pruning my tomatoes when I couldn't, for migrating the citrus trees each winter, and for your daily prayers for my writing and our lives. I love you.

Gracie, Joshua, Sarah, I love you, little butter beans.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

And to Mama J, wherever you are, know that you are loved by a big God who has you in the palm of His hand. Thank you for choosing life for Sarah—we are forever grateful.

P. S. ccgtjhwaesrr ttrry v tg—Love, Joshua Cecil, who is sitting on my lap. (His first published words at the tender age of one.)

She
believed
SHE COULDN'T
so He did.

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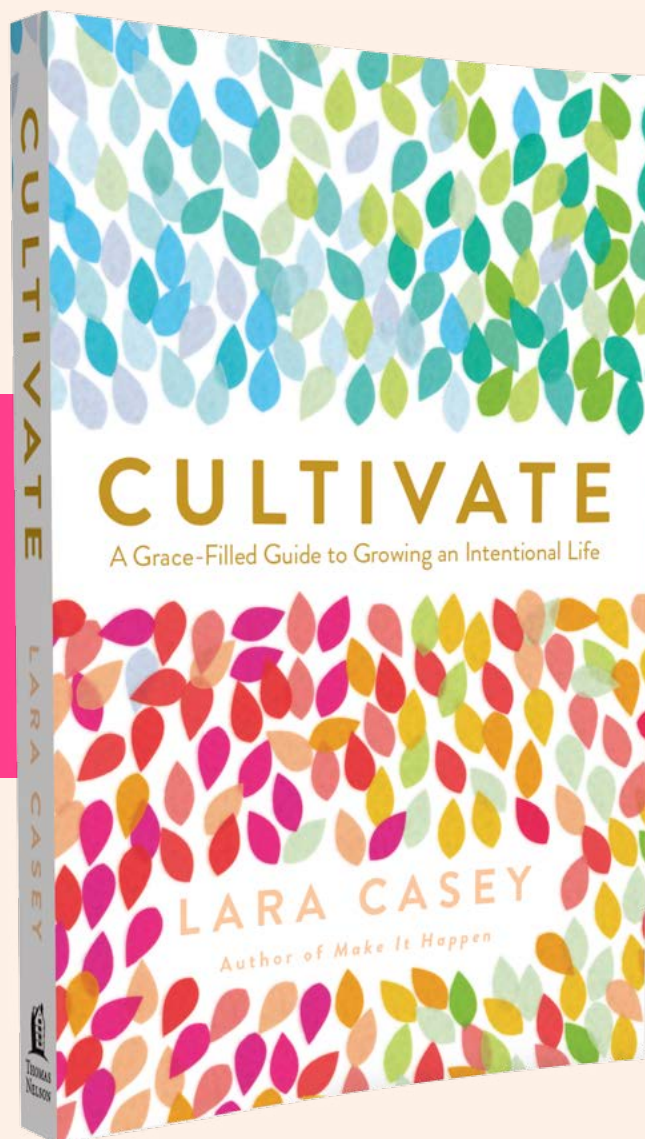
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Hi, y'all! I'm Lara. I'm a mom to three—one through the gift of adoption—a grateful wife, and a believer in the impossible (we have quite the story!). If we were having tea together right now, you'd find out quickly that I'm passionate about helping people get unstuck, unrushed, and living on purpose instead of by accident. To help with those things, I created the PowerSheets grace-filled, goal-setting planner and Write the Word journals, and I founded *Southern Weddings* magazine a decade ago. I'm the author of this little book you're holding in your hands and *Make It Happen: Surrender Your Fear. Take the Leap. Live On Purpose*. I love getting my hands dirty in the garden, exploring local farms, and living in Chapel Hill, North Carolina!

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