

# In His Footsteps

How to be Happy Soul Deep

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Margaret Agard

IN HIS FOOTSTEPS:  
How I learned to be happy soul-deep

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## Dedication

To my husband Parker  
whose eyes reflect a life  
of generosity and love

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## Introduction

One day I just picked up my pen—or in this case my keyboard—and started writing my daily life, the way you might share it with a friend or neighbor. Except from a deeper place.—the place where I talk with God.

I wrote about what it's like to struggle—to struggle with the daily challenges of work, raising teenagers, stressing over money, and feeling prompted to reach out and help others, but being so overloaded with things to do already that I couldn't see how to do even one more thing.

I struggled to submit my will to God's and to follow His leadings and promptings. He never demanded. Just requested. Or when I'd asked about what to do about a problem often He'd actually tell me what to do and then waited to see what I would do. Every time I followed His will, counsel, or prompting, I was filled with joy and happiness—soul-deep happiness.

But time and again, I refused to follow. It just seemed too hard. When I did it, my days of submission were both simpler and more fulfilling. I was filled with energy. I was never discouraged or stressed. At the end of each day, I felt deep satisfaction and pleasure. I had true purpose to my actions, even the simplest ones. I knew—because people told me so—that my simple actions, such as bringing a dinner, making a telephone call, or apologizing, were making a difference. When I listened, my life had meaning.

And yet it continued to be a struggle. Isn't that strange? I was just too busy, too afraid, too offended. It was as if I was saying to God, "Let me live my selfish life in misery and anxiety. I don't have time to be happy."

It was my own personal "Groundhog Day" experience, the movie where Bill Murray keeps reliving the same day over and over. That was me then. Even now when I stray—because who doesn't—it still is me. God asked me to do a particular thing (help, forgive, move, trust more, or give up an activity.) I didn't want to. I argued, ignored Him, found other things to do, tried a different way. Finally I did it. When I did, I was happy. My problems were handled, often miraculously. God asked me to do something else. I didn't want to. Repeat, repeat, repeat.

Until at last I got it: The struggle was between what I thought would make me happy and what God knew would make me happy. I'm his child. He knows me better

than I know myself. Counseling with and following God's promptings is what it takes to be happy. It's not about waiting until I have my life in order so I have time, money and energy to listen to God and do what He wants. It's about listening to God, doing as He asks, and then He gets my life in order. What a gift.

That's what this book is about. What God wants for me and wants for you, too—to learn how to be happy. All the rest of it— the simpler life, the true purpose, the energy, the joy, the focus— come along as part of the package, the life of soul-deep happiness.

## The Yellow Pad: A Wisdom Prayer

*April 8th*

God gave me a gift today. Awhile ago I gave up trying to make my life work with all my lists, calendars and yellow sticky notes and just said, “God, I need help! I have clients who are expecting custom reports, EPA global warming scenarios to run, church members who need me—the Relief Society president—to come and help with emergencies, two sons who need rides for school and doctor appointments, and a husband who wants my full attention. No matter what I do, there’s a longer list that doesn’t get done.”

The list on the yellow pad gets longer and longer and I sleep less and less. I tell my kids, my clients, and my Relief Society counselors that if it’s not on the yellow pad, then it’s not getting done, so make sure you see me write it there. Even then, it might not get done.

Now it’s in God’s hands. Each day I get up, take my legal-sized, yellow pad with five pages of unfinished to-do’s (one on each line) and make my list of priorities for the day on another sheet. Then I take that sheet and pray and ask God what He wants me to do. Most of the time, I cross off half of my list and then add two or three people He wants me to call.

Lately I haven’t even looked at the yellow pad except to add things then asked God each day what my tasks are. I’m afraid to look at the pad. I don’t want to know what I’m forgetting. Today as I listed my to-do’s for the day—finish the income taxes, take Ryan to the doctor, have the missionaries to dinner, make the dinner first—I could feel the Spirit whispering, “Look at the yellow pad. Look at the yellow pad.”

I said, *I don’t want to look at the yellow pad. It discourages me to see the yellow pad.*

Finally, at 10:00 this morning, when the Spirit still hadn’t given up, I said, *Fine. You win. I’ll look at the yellow pad. There must be an important task I’m overlooking.*

I looked through all five pages, searching for that important task, crossing off the things I’ve already done as I searched and, guess what. There’s nothing left to be done on the yellow pad.

How did God do that?

## The Room

*April 9th*

I wake thinking of The Room. I know I'm going to be back there again before my years of serving as Relief Society president are over, and I both dread and desire it. Being in That Room confronts me with people's deepest sorrows and most profound joys. I witness these and feel my own. That is The Room. Wherever pain cries out for comfort, hope and help.

The first time I go to The Room is less than a month after I've been called and set apart as the Relief Society president. While visiting people in the local community hospital friends discovered an 83-year-old woman who is a member. She isn't attending church because for the entire year she's lived in our area her husband has been dying. We didn't know of her as she hadn't had her church records transferred from her former home hundreds of miles away.

Now, he is in the hospital in the final stages of death, her family is far away and his family is angry with her. She needs help and support, I am the Relief Society president—so I go.

I find her in the clinic of the hospital having her own illnesses treated. I tell her who I am—my name of course—but mostly my calling. She knows what it means to be the Relief Society president because she looks frantically into my eyes for the peace she is searching for, pulls me down beside her and begins to talk, her words spelling out her pain and troubles. Then she asks the question. “Why is God doing this to me? Why? I've lived a good life. This is painful. Why me? Why now?”

Ah, now I see. It isn't The Room. It is the Question. The Question I am asked so often. The Question I have asked so often. She is just one of many I am to meet in the coming months asking this question in many different-but-somehow-the-same rooms. The handbook for Relief Society presidents is direct and straightforward. Even if I know the answer to the Question, I am not to share it. This is her struggle, her time for growth. This is a relief, because most of the time, I don't know the answer. And when I think I do, I'm often wrong. The answers aren't always what we think. But the pain is clear.

And so, I sit in the room, feeling the pain our choices bring. And the pain that living life gives us. Because that is the gift given to the Relief Society president, to feel others' pain on the deepest level.

I pray before I go to each Room, each struggling sister and immediately the Spirit is there and I feel God's presence. I sit, and feel, and say nothing but the words I am given to speak. They are seldom words of advice, and always words of comfort. *God loves you. He hears you. Turn to Him. He will comfort you. Only He can heal this pain.*

I feel the pain and, after three months of being Relief Society president, I spend an entire afternoon just weeping. I know now why He was called Man of Sorrows. I am walking hand in hand with the Master as part of this calling.

It is only when I turn away, and go back to real life and phone calls, and making doctor's appointments that the Spirit slowly subsides. It's then I often think, *Can't she see how she caused this?* At times we are the cause of our own pain. But I don't ask those questions while I am there with the Master beside me. Then, I only feel His love and peace. His desire to use me as the physical instrument for His children, for His daughters, to feel that love and peace coming from me. A few think it is me. But the wise know it is Him.

I am to give no answers, but only to direct them to Him. When they go to Him, I see the change. It will be all right. They are not alone. The pain is there, but it is less, and hope is there, too. Those who turn to Him struggle, but eventually they figure it out. It hurts less when I serve others. When I forgive, the anger, hurt and fear I'm holding on to go away and I am at peace. I am free.

This is also the gift of the Relief Society president. To see the growth of others and to feel the love of God. I weep once again—this time with tears of joy at the nobleness of my brothers and sisters here on earth. At the calm acceptance of trouble and suffering as they rise above it to serve others, to forgive things that seem impossible to me to forgive.

For those who refuse to turn to Him, I am there. Still listening, still comforting, still bringing soup and offering rides and firewood, and hoping and praying they will take the greater gift—the love God has for them.

## **Meeting Parker**

*April 10th*

A few years after my first marriage of twenty five years ended when my then

husband, father of our eight children, went to live the life of a gay artist, I met my now husband, Parker, over the Internet.

What I was really trying to do was to keep my oldest son Michael from going 2000 miles away to a university to finish his Bachelors degree and find a wife. Finishing his degree wasn't the issue. Nor was finding a wife – except for the part about going far away

“Nooooo,” I wailed at him. “Don't go there. You'll marry some girl from California and then you'll have to live near HER family and we'll never see you again.”

Look at this I told him pointing to a new singles match-up site just for church people. This was 1997 before these sites were everywhere and for every kind of interest.

You can meet someone from here I told him. Then I coached him on how to fill out the form. Tell the truth I told him. There's a lid for every pot as my brother Jim says. Be exactly who you are so you'll meet the person who will love you just as you are.

Rather than fill out his profile - although I'm controlling enough to do that - I set the example by filling out one for myself. I wrote about my eight children and mentioned that I loved children but didn't want any more and these were almost all grown – just two left in high school. Then I mentioned my job as an executive in the high tech industry. Thinking I might attract another executive type – and they like to golf- I decided to make it clear I hate golf. In fact, I wrote, I'd rather give birth again than play golf.

A day or so later I got an email from Parker who also hates golf. A match made in heaven.

The upshot? Michael did go far away where he met and married Mendy whose family lives just a couple hours away from our Virginia home. I married Parker and moved from urban DC to 10 acres in rural California.

See? God does have a sense of irony.

## **An Angry Family Home Evening** *April 11th*

Matthias, my youngest son, turned another family home evening into an angry

blast-against-God again last night. “I hate God. He sucks. I’m not asking for everything, but couldn’t God give me a break once in while?” Matthias is 18, a senior, and is studying the Old Testament in early morning scripture study this year, so he has lots of ammunition for his belief that God is as an angry, vengeful, jealous Being.

“The good people suffer the most,” says Matthias, “While the people who don’t go to church get everything.”

“All what everything,” I ask. “Peace, joy, love, comfort?”

Matthias hates it when I talk like this, but I’m getting a little tired of his griping, so I just cut to the heart of it.

Off he goes, “Good people go to church in rags while people who don’t go to church have nice clothes, and good cars and big houses.”

He’s pushing it now. “Who do you know who goes to church in rags? Anyway, having money and nice cars doesn’t mean you don’t suffer and have pain. Everyone does. It’s why we’re down here. To grow. You might as well accept it now or go through your entire life bitter and complaining. You can’t grow without any suffering. No pain, no gain, right?” As a weight lifter, he’s heard that analogy from me so many times I don’t need to go any further.

“Yeah. That, too. He sent us down here knowing we’re going to have pain. What kind of loving God is that?”

“One who loves us enough to let us grow,” I say.

“He even knows we’re going to fail. God tells us we’re going to fail. He knows it and sent us down here anyway. Then lords it over us, telling us he’s perfect and he’s so great and he’ll take care of it for us,” says Matthias.

*This* is a new twist on an old argument. I have to think for a moment about this one. Matthias’s the last of my eight children going through the teenage years. I’ve usually heard it all before, so I can’t help but admire him for thinking of it. And I’m kind of grateful, too. After 18 years of the same discussions—the names change, the arguments stay the same—it’s nice to hear a new one.

I say, “God knows what you’re capable of. It’s like becoming an Olympic skater. You can’t become a world class ice skater without falling. God says to get up and try again, you’ll get it. Most of us have been working on the same things for 20 years, and we’re still falling. But if He hasn’t given up, why should we? He even says, ‘I’ll show you how it’s done.’ He’s not showing off. He knows we have what it takes and He wants us to get there.

He says, ‘Take my hand. I’ll help you the first couple of times. You’ll get the hang of it, and I’ll forget that you fell. So should you.’ How does this make him a terrible God?”

His face is still bitter.

I am getting a little tired of this anger and tension and say, “Matthias. Just drop it. These arguments get us nowhere. You keep saying the same things. I can’t change your mind. And anger doesn’t help. I don’t mind questions, but you aren’t questioning—you’re just complaining.”

He says, “This is how I ask questions.”

“Then take this one to God, because only He can answer this in a way you’ll understand.”

Matthias says, “I did ask Him.”

A moment of silence. This is good news. I ask, “What did He say?”

Matthias says, “He said look around you at all you do have.”

I almost laugh as hope wells up in my heart. I know for sure Matthias is praying and God is answering his prayers, because that is the answer. But he still sounds bitter and sarcastic. A lot of us get the answers and then ignore them, and I worry this is what is happening with Matthias.

I say, “Well, then do that, because that’s what works.”

He’s offended. “I do do that. I always thank him when I pray. And my car is still broken and my life still sucks. No offense, but I have to live here with you and my stepdad and not back East with my friends. My friend Martin’s parents gave him a car and everything else, and they don’t go to church.”

I say, “They just gave him a car, and Martin is a happy boy?”

Matthias says, “No, he’s not. He’s an idiot. He crashed his car, and he flunked out of school, and he’s on drugs, and they told him when he’s 18 that he’s out of the house. And he’ll really be in trouble then, because he doesn’t know how to work or how much anything is worth.”

I say, “Why is that?”

He says, “Because his parents gave him everything. He didn’t have to work for any of it, and he isn’t even grateful.”

Matthias and I just look at each other for a moment and then I say, “Son, I think you just answered your own question.”

## Peacocks as Watchdogs? Think Again

*April 14th*

Peacocks are beautiful birds, and they make good watchdogs, which is why we have them. Or so my husband, Parker, says. Parker just loves animals and adventure and oddities. That's really why we have peacocks—and emus and a llama and a donkey. If you haven't heard them before, peacocks scream like fighting cats in heat, only harsher and louder. A friend played his bagpipes on our property one day, and the peacocks started screaming. They were louder than the bagpipes! Parker says if they weren't so beautiful they'd be extinct just because of that sound. I agree wholeheartedly.

For the last two weeks various animals have come near—not on—the property, setting off the peacocks around three or four in the morning. First it was coyotes who set up a little coyote-peacock chorus with the peacocks. Then it was male turkeys whose loud gobbles used to bother me, but thanks to the peacocks, they sound soft and gentle to me now. Then it was the dog that belongs to the people who live on the opposite hill. The dog, scared by the peacocks' screams, started barking, and the peacocks screamed at each bark. That went on for an hour. Then the alarm went off.

One night, we didn't have a clue what set them off. Parker said it was probably a raccoon nosing around the chicken pen or the garden.

About 5:30 every morning the peacocks fly up to the deck outside our second story bedroom and stomp around. They go from there to the roof. It sounds like a two-hundred-pound man up there stomping around. It was scary at first because I thought maybe there was a two-hundred-pound man stomping around up there, but then I realized it was the peacocks.

See where we are? A two-hundred-pound man could come onto our property setting off the peacocks (that we would think were screaming at a raccoon) then climb up on our deck to force his way in - even stomp around on the deck - and we would ignore him, thinking it was just a peacock. So much for the peacocks-as-watchdogs theory.

## When a Child Forgives You

*April 16th*

Daniel, my 20-year-old son, came in and lay down on the bed next to me last night to chat. He told me he was sorry about his rebellions, and all the trouble he caused for his stepdad. He needed to say it, and I was glad to hear it. But he didn't *have* to say it. I knew he would come to this eventually, because he's a good young man.

So this is for those of my eight children who haven't reached that point yet. If I should die before you reach that point, then don't worry that you didn't get to tell me before I died. I knew you'd get here eventually.

But, especially, let me say thank you for forgiving me my failures and mistakes enough to see me as worth apologizing to. That's what it takes before you ask me for forgiveness - forgiving me first. And I do appreciate it. So even if you never said it while I was alive, it's ok. Although, it is nice to hear it.

My eldest son, Michael, once told me he'd figured out that I was the perfect mother for him. I asked why, and he said it was because he was kind of an odd person with a sarcastic sense of humor and I appreciated his humor. I asked if he didn't think I'd warped him into that, and he said no. He was just that way. Also, the best part of my mothering is that I was never very compassionate. Well true but who thinks of that as a good character trait?

I asked what he meant by that. Was he talking about how I used to tell them not to bleed on the carpet?

No, he said he's a bit of a whiner and a complainer. He recognizes that but says I never fell for it. Basically just told him to man up and get on with life.

## Hearing the Spirit

*April 17th*

When I was about 23 years old, I heard a person in church talk about her conversations with God. Conversations? I didn't know it was possible. I just thought you prayed, got up, went about your day, and things either happened or they didn't.

I went to the Lord and said I would like to have experiences that helped me understand when He was talking with me. It seemed illogical that He could, since if I hadn't been able to understand yet, what could He do differently? But you never know with God. He's accomplished bigger miracles. It doesn't hurt to ask.

The next day, I made a pot of chili that kept getting bigger and bigger. I had this recurring thought that I should invite a particular couple—let's call them the Joneses—to dinner. I kept trying to dismiss it, to argue with it.

*They just came on Friday. They'll think it's weird to get another invite so soon.*

"Invite them anyway," said the little voice in my head.

*Tonight's family home evening night—we're only supposed to have family.*

"Invite them to stay for family home evening."

Finally, I thought, OK. *I'll invite them.*

I did, and they were pleased. They came and ate. Sat through family home evening, which was a lesson and activity on tithing.

As the lesson ended they said, "We haven't paid our tithing in a while. We were committed to paying all we owed. For various reasons our paycheck was short, and we had just enough money come in on Saturday to pay only our tithing. We're about out of food and we would have no food money. So we spent all Saturday deciding what to do. On Sunday we just handed in our check to pay our full tithing and trusted in the Lord to provide. By the end of Church on Sunday, we had invitations to dinner every night except tonight. Then this morning you called."

I had three more experiences like that in a week. Every time, I argued with the thought. Every time when I finally listened and acted, I discovered the people had been praying for that exact thing. I cannot describe the joy I felt being an instrument in the Lord's hand, helping people's faith to grow.

From that, I learned to recognize the Lord's prompting. It is a still, small voice—no more than a thought. I learned that if I'm arguing with a thought and it keeps coming back, it's Him. I don't argue with myself.

I learned we are often each other's answers to prayers. I understand now why we are told that the Lord will hold us accountable for the good we might have done, had we done our duty.

I've learned that if I'm praying and thinking about a concern, certain Scriptures just jump out at me. That's the Spirit. But I have to be reading the scriptures. Other times, as I write in my journal about my questions, certain thoughts come to me. As

I write them, I recognize them as being of the Lord. But I have to be writing in my journal.

And the most wonderful gift of all is to be able to pray with my husband until we come to a unity of the spirit, for then I am assured this is of the Lord.

Whenever I ignore the Voice, I regret it. The Lord wants to bless me. I frequently make it impossible for Him to do that, especially when it doesn't look like a blessing at first. Once I learned to recognize the spirit, I had to learn to truly trust God and act on the prompting because, often, it is after the show of faith that the blessings come.

One time I sensed a year in advance that I was going to get a job offer and that I should take it and move to a city 2,000 miles from our current home. Three of the children were in high school and very happy where we were living. Michael was just finishing his black belt in karate and loved his class and his friends. We spent a year praying about it as a family and preparing. Looking back on it, different children have told me they are glad now that we moved. Their lives would have been much different if we'd stayed where we were. In the new place they met people of many different cultures and backgrounds. This helped them become more open and accepting of others. The new school put a heavy emphasis on preparing for college rather than technical training. The near-by city gave them experiences not possible in our former midwestern community. They had the best of both available to them.

But it was not painless. The first year after the move was horrible. The three older children struggled the most. Elisabeth did not come out of her room for a year except to go to school. Michael was so angry, he failed all of his classes or came close to it (while scoring 1400 on the SATs). Christian had emotional scars he worked for years to overcome. The only thing that kept us from moving right back was the knowledge that this was of the Lord and the growing pains would be worth it.

Then suddenly the worst was over. New friends, new experiences, new attitudes brought happiness.

I had the gift of visiting my father often during the last six months before he died. I sat next to him with my brothers and sisters as he drew his last breaths. As painful as it was, it would have been more painful to not be there.

I learned from all those experiences. I learned that the longer the notice is that the Lord gives me for an impending change and the stronger the prompting, the harder it is going to be. But the joy is always as great as the pain. Michael and Flora

have both returned to that neighborhood we left. They both said they are glad now that we moved.

I think He gives me that extra time and prompting as a blessing so that I can be assured I'm on the right path when all seems to my limited view to be going wrong.

The first step is learning to recognize that spiritual prompting and then trusting enough to act on it.

## **Preparing to Die**

*April 18th*

A year ago, I had this sense that I would die this year in the spring. Spring officially ends on June 20. Because of my own personal beliefs, I took this to be the truth. While readers of this entry might not have the same beliefs, there might be a similar experience you would believe. Perhaps a doctor saying you have cancer throughout your body.

This is what I did. I immediately made lists of things to do: Finish the will. Talk with the children. Clean my house. Lose weight. (Parker asked, "Why do you want to lose weight if you are going to die?" To which I answered, "So I won't be heavy in my coffin.") Start a journal of the last year. Get the book On Death and Dying by Elizabeth Kubler Ross and re-read it. And on and on.

Then I thought, *What am I doing? When confronted with life's most profound and frightening change, I am just acting like me. I haven't suddenly become a sensitive, people person who stops to smell the roses. I'm still just an organized, take-care-of-the-practical-details list maker.*

Later, I started thinking about how I'd like to live my last year. I realized I wanted to keep doing what I was doing—only more of some things and less of others. I love my life.

I read a short anecdote about a student approaching a monk who was doing a rote task such as weeding a garden. The student asked the monk what he would do if he knew he only had a few minutes left to live. The monk replied, "I would keep weeding this garden." That's how I feel.

## Purple

*April 21st*

You can't get purple without red.

I have a friend who once said that if she could get rid of anything in her life it would be the sexual abuse she endured from a favorite uncle as a young girl. She would keep the fire that destroyed her home and all of her possessions, her adopted daughter's drug addiction which led to her raising her drug-damaged grandchildren and many other trials. Just that one thing she couldn't accept.

She cried aloud about this to God one day, "Why this? Why did this one thing have to happen? I can take the rest."

She felt His Spirit ask her, "What is the character trait you are most proud of?"

She told me it is her ability to step into a crisis situation, know immediately what must be done and have the courage to swiftly take action. Even as she thought it, she saw the connection between that abuse and her developing this particular character trait. She *knew* she would not be that person without that incident. She loves this part of herself. And then she said, "I love purple. You can't get purple without red."

So often all we see of a person is the purple and not the red that got him there.

*And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose Romans 8:28*

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