

things i don't do

A few years ago, at the very end of my frantic twenties, I was working more than full-time, all the while pricked with invisible needles of dissatisfaction, waking up in the night longing to write, buzzing through the days on coffee and adrenaline, wearing clothes that should have been taken to the dry cleaner six wearings ago. I was trying to think about becoming a mother. I knew it would change everything, but I couldn't picture it, because no one ever can. I couldn't see a way through to any other way of living, but I knew that there must be one. I saw women who were older than me, who did work they believed in and parented well, and, most surprisingly, didn't seem nearly as frantic and chronically unkempt. I wanted what they had, and I had no idea how to get it.

I love the illusion of being able to do it all, and I'm fascinated with people who seem to do that, who have challenging careers and beautiful homes and vibrant minds and well-tended abs. Throw in polite children and a garden, and I'm coming over for lessons.

Out to lunch one day with my friend Denise, I asked her about it. Denise is a mother of four, and a grandmother,

bittersweet

and she works and writes and travels and cooks, and—most important to me at that time—she seems settled in some fundamental way. There's something she knows about herself that I didn't yet know about myself, certainly.

We were at the Blue Water Grill, on a beautiful lake, unless you're from Grand Rapids, apparently, because then you know that it used to be a quarry, and to them it's sort of like having lunch crater-side. But it's beautiful to me, having only known it as a lake. We ate pesto pizza and spinach salad with red onion slivers and poppyseed dressing, and long after the food was cleared, we drank iced tea and watched the water.

And this is what Denise told me: she said it's not hard to decide what you want your life to be about. What's hard, she said, is figuring out what you're willing to give up in order to do the things you really care about. Her words from that day have been rattling around inside me for years now, twisting around, whispering, taking shape. Since that time we've worked together, traveled together, cried together, but when I think of her, I will always think of that day, and the wind on the fake lake, and the clarity and weight of those words.

I'm a list-keeper. I always, always have a to-do list, and it ranges from the mundane: go to the dry cleaner, go to the post office, buy batteries; to the far-reaching: stop eating Henry's leftover Dino Bites, get over yourself, forgive nasty reviewer, wear more jewelry.

At one point, I kept adding to the list, more and more items, more and more sweeping in their scope, until I added this line: DO EVERYTHING BETTER. It was, at the time, a pretty appropriate way to capture how I felt about my life and myself fairly often. It also explains why I tended to get so tired I'd cry without knowing why, why my life sometimes

things i don't do

felt like I was running on a hamster wheel, and why I searched the faces of calmer, more grounded women for a secret they all knew that I didn't. This is how I got to that fragmented, brittle, lonely place: DO EVERYTHING BETTER.

Each of the three words has a particular flavor of poison all its own. *Do*: we know better than *do*, of course. We know that words like "be," and "become," and "try," are a little less crushing and cruel, spiritually and psychologically, a little friendlier to the soul. But when we're alone sometimes and the list is getting the best of us, we abandon all those sweet ideas, and we go straight to *do*, because *do* is power, push, aggression, plain old sweat equity. It's not pretty, but we know that *do* gets the job done.

Everything is just a killer. *Everything* is the heart of the conversation for me, my drug of choice. Sure, I can host that party. Of course, I can bring that meal. Yes, I'd love to write that article. Yes, to *everything*.

This winter, I got the kind of tired that you can't recover from, almost like something gets altered on a cellular level, and you begin to fantasize about what it would be like to just not be tired anymore. You don't fantasize about money or men or the Italian Riviera. All you daydream about is not feeling exhausted, about neck muscles that don't throb, about a mind that isn't fogged every single day. I was talking to my husband about it in the car one night. I was complaining about being tired, but also bringing up the fact that lots of women travel and work and have kids. Everybody has a house to clean. Why can't I pull it together?

He said, gently, ostensibly helpfully, something along the lines of "you know, honey, just because some other people can do all that, it doesn't mean that you can or have to. Maybe it's too much for you."

One tiny, almost imperceptible beat of silence. And

bittersweet

then I yelled, viscerally, from the depths of my soul, as though possessed, "I'M NOT WEAK!"

As soon as the words came out, we looked at each other in alarm. It seemed, perhaps, we'd hit upon the heart of something. One of my core fears is that someone would think I can't handle as much as the next person. It's fundamental to my understanding of myself for me to be the strong one, the capable one, the busy one, the one who can bail you out, not make a fuss, bring a meal, add a few more things to the list. For me, *everything* becomes a lifestyle. *Everything* is an addiction.

And then *better*. *Better* is a seductress. It's so delicious to run after *better, better, better*. *Better* is what keeps some women decorating and redecorating the same house for years on end, because by the time you get the last detail of the finished basement home theater just right, your countertops are just ever so slightly outdated, and so you start again. *Better* is what makes us go to a spinning class—or maybe two, or maybe three today, just for good measure. *Better* is what makes us get "just a little work done," after the last baby, you know, or just to look a little bit fresher and more well-rested. *Better* is a force.

The three together, DO EVERYTHING BETTER, are a super-charged triple threat, capturing in three words the mania of modern life, the anti-spirit, anti-spiritual, soul-shriveling garbage that infects and compromises our lives. And I'm the one who wrote those words on my very own to-do list. I'm in a lot of trouble with my own self for that, because the "do everything better" way of living brought me to a terrible place: tired, angry, brittle, afraid, hollow. And Denise's words keep ringing in my ears, a song I had heard in the distance, like steel drums across the water, a song I want desperately to hear again.

things i don't do

She was right. Deciding what I wanted wasn't that hard. But deciding what I'm willing to give up for those things is like yoga for your superego, stretching and pushing and ultimately healing that nasty little person inside of you who exists only for what people think.

Things I Do:

Above all else, I try to keep my faith in Christ at the very center of my life, the heart and source of everything. I trust God's voice as my guide and Christ as my comforter. I pray, I practice confession and forgiveness, and I seek to see the world through the eyes of its Creator, believing everything can be redeemed. I'm a part of my church community, volunteering on its behalf, and working to make a better city and a better world because of our church community.

I do everything I can to make my marriage a deeply connected partnership. I work hard at being a good partner to Aaron, to walk with him and hear him and learn with him.

I give the best of my day to raise my son, and I dream about being a mother to more children someday. For the record, though, I did not and do not do very many of those super-achiever-mom things, like making baby food from scratch. I think the baby food people are doing a very nice job making baby food, and I bought it at Target.

I work hard to become a better writer with each page. I want to tell the truth as best I can, to tell the story of God and who he is and what he does, both through the way I write and the way I live. I write and read, in airports and hotel rooms and coffee shops and in the little blue room in our house. I read novels and essays and magazines and cookbooks and the Bible, and I couldn't live well without those things.

I live in daily, honest, intimate community with a small group of people. I give my time and energy and prayer to

my immediate family and close friends. To a slightly wider circle of people, I give them my love and friendship through intermittent emails and very occasional visits.

Our home is a place of celebration and comfort for people we love, so I cook and entertain a lot, because it makes me feel alive and happy, the perfect counterpoint to the other part of my life—the lonely, typing part. It seems, I know, like one of the things that should be the first to go, along with novels, maybe, but I can't live well without gathering people around our table. It gives me energy and creativity and spark, so it stays.

And then there are, of course, a few other things I do, just for being a person in America who does not have a personal assistant and is not, say, the president. This list includes, but is not limited to: trips to the DMV, laundry folding, diaper buying, and occasional flossing. Even if I did have a personal assistant, I would stipulate that I still do my own flossing, because I'm just that grounded.

So those are the things I do, things I believe in or feel called to, or just things that fall within my area of responsibility on the planetary chore list. But the more important list is the other one: the list of things I don't do. I come back to it regularly, adding to it. The first list was easy. And then came the hard part. What am I willing to *not* do in order to do these things I believe in? Silence. Blank paper. More silence. Finally, a few things came to mind.

Things I Don't Do:

I don't garden. Our landscaping in Grand Rapids was so bad that Becky, our neighbor, came over of her own accord and dug out all our beds, partially because she's a wonderful person and partially, I'm sure, because five years of driving past the wreckage of our front yard very nearly drove her to the brink of insanity. I've been feeling like sort

things i don't do

of a loser because I don't garden. I have friends who garden, and they talk a lot about the spiritual implications of new life springing from the earth, the deep communion with God that they experience as they lovingly tend to their herbs and flowers. But I'm going to have to miss out on all that, because, at least for now, no gardening.

I don't do major home improvement projects or scour flea markets and antique shops for the perfect home accessories. No expectation for perfect housekeeping, either—I try for clean countertops and no horrible smells, but beyond that, it's pretty rough. At our house, "home improvement" involves clearing off the coffee table every few days and loading and unloading the dishwasher.

I don't always change my clothes just because I'm leaving the house. I wear yoga pants 99 percent of the time, and I pretend that other people don't notice that I'm wearing my pajamas in public.

I don't make our bed in the morning, standing firm on the adolescent belief that there's no sense in doing something you're just going to undo at the end of the day.

I don't bake. I don't like to bake, because there's too much math and science involved. I purchase cakes from the bakery or serve chocolates and fruit. I know baking is such a mom thing to do, and that possibly my son would be happier if the aroma of freshly baked bread or cookies woke him from his naptime slumber. But at least for now, no baking, during naptime or any other time.

Scrapbooking and photo album making are both on the list, although I do take a lot of pictures of my kid with my phone.

I only blow-dry my hair on special occasions, and my fingernails haven't been painted since the nineties. There's only so much time.

bittersweet

I don't spend time with people who routinely make me feel like less than I am, or who spend most of their time talking about what's wrong with everyone else and what's wrong with the world, or who really like to talk about other people's money.

It's brutal, making the list of Things I Don't Do, especially for someone like me, who refuses most of the time to acknowledge that there is, in fact, a limit to her personal ability to get things done. But I've discovered that the list sets me free. I have it written in black and white, sitting on my desk, and when I'm tempted to go rogue and bake muffins because all the other moms do, I come back to both lists, and I remind myself about the important things: that time is finite, as is energy. And that one day I'll stand before God and account for what I did with my life. There is work that is only mine to do: a child that is ours to raise, stories that are mine to tell, friends that are mine to walk with. The grandest seduction of all is the myth that DOING EVERYTHING BETTER gets us where we want to be. It gets us somewhere, certainly, but not anywhere worth being.