

### Week 3: Replacing Suffering with Presence

Three years ago, I bought an iPad mini.

I intended to use it, primarily, as an eReader. The idea of carrying all my books around in one place was a dream come true. The future was here—it didn't have flying cars, but it did have portable libraries, and that was enough for me. I'd be able to read whatever I wanted, whenever I wanted. I could highlight passages, bookmark and unbookmark pages, make notes and edit them, all without doing any damage to these lovely creations called books. I'd be able to increase the font, which would be better for my eyes. And I could read in the dark. Electronic books were cheaper and I could have them on demand. The possibilities were endless.

Instead, I suffered.

Everyone has a different definition of suffering. I have about fifteen myself. But here's one that is starting to make more sense to me: *Suffering is resistance to what is*. Suffering is opposition to the present moment and demand for the next moment. Suffering is having this but wanting that. Suffering is the search for the next thing. Suffering is the mental roaming we do for what might be.

Suffering is, for instance, trying to read something brilliant, while wondering about something *better*. Suffering is opening your iPad, settling into a good book—for about a minute—before remembering the text message you didn't reply to. It's highlighting a perfect passage, emailing it to a friend, and then remembering the other emails you forgot to send. Suffering is spending your reading time in the iBooks store, looking for the next new release. Suffering is a mind that thinks about what it *could* be doing, rather than what it *is* doing.

In other words, suffering is what my iPad trained me to do, for three years.

Whether you read books on an iPad or not, the reality is, we're *all* swimming in an increasingly loud and agitating sea of activities and obligations and the voices of business and commerce and news and information. According to former Google CEO Eric Schmidt, between the birth of the world and 2003, human beings created five exabytes of information. By 2010, we were creating five exabytes *every two days*. And by 2020, we will be generating fifty times more information *daily*.

Our brains are adjusting to the pace.

We turn on push notifications for our phones so we don't fall behind. We reply to text messages as soon as we get them. We have twenty news channels on the television and countless news apps for our tablets. We check email on vacation so we won't have to deal with the tsunami of information when we return. Our minds are like runaway trains and our hearts are screaming along for the ride.

This doesn't end well. In fact, this is how it ends:

Several years ago, for Christmas, my wife gave me a paperback called *Lila*, by Marilynne Robinson, a sequel of sorts to one of my favorite novels of all time. At first, I actually considered repurchasing it as an eBook. However, in a moment of blessed clarity, I decided repurchasing a Christmas present would cross a line into crazy I just wasn't willing to traverse. So, instead, for the first time in years, I sat down to read a paperback. The prose was powerful. Poetry in paragraph form. The pages gave me moments like this: "Kindness was something he didn't even know he wanted, and here it was. It made him teary and restless..." Phrases to rest upon and sink into. Words that can teach you something about yourself, if you can only sit still long enough to let them.

But my iBrain.

Just.

Couldn't.

Do it.

I wanted to flick faster through the pages. I wondered what notifications I was missing. I thought of things I needed to add to my to-do list. I remembered the purchases I wanted to make on Amazon. But more than anything, my mind just wanted something *else*. It wanted to move faster. Do more. Have more. Not because what was in front of me wasn't *pleasant*, but because it had gotten used to wanting something other than what was *present*.

And that is an exquisite kind of suffering.

As I looked out the window, useless paperback in hand, lamenting the pace of the world and the speed of my life, I recalled an unseasonably cool summer night in the year before. I remembered sitting beneath a great maple tree, my mind speeding up as the sun went down. I watched the great orb slip slowly—oh-so-slowly—closer to the horizon and its rays found their way through the leaves of our shade tree and they struck my eye and I blinked myself present. My mind stopped *racing* around and, instead, I *looked* around. The treetops rustled languidly. Birds chirped peacefully. A dog barked sporadically in the distance. The grass stood still. And I became aware:

The world isn't moving at an increasingly rapid pace; we humans are.

The world is moving at the same pace it always has. It still takes 365 days to lap the sun. This spinning globe still takes twenty-four hours to return us to where we began. The sun still arcs lazily across the sky, day after day after day. The seasons refuse to be rushed. The world will wind down for winter as it always has: the leaves will gather color and fall to the ground at the same languid pace. The geese will still get a head start on their migration so they won't have to hurry. Beneath the frenzy

we've created is a world created for slowness and balance and harmony and wholeness and unity. Beneath all the noise is a rhythm beating slow and steady.

But we won't find it in our email inboxes or Facebook feeds.

Life is chaotic and often overwhelming, but there is a beauty pulsating amidst the mess. There is redemption humming somewhere in the chaos. Our stories are, each and every one of them, sacred and holy. The next scene is always up to us. There is a murmur of grace beneath all things, assuring us that, no matter what, we are beautiful and beloved and worthy of love and belonging. Within any moment held mindfully in front of us, we can come closer to touching the reality of life floating still and quiet just beneath the choppy waves of this world. And the reality is this:

We are not here to suffer. We are not here to wish for the next thing. We are here to be present to what is. We are here to be present to who we are, to become the Love from which we sprang, to give it and to receive it, and to let our souls settle into the eternal, peaceful rhythm of the world which exists somewhere quietly underneath all of our clicking and flicking.