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Finding Contentment in a
Discontented
World

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Chapter One

THE BATTLE BEGINS

When I agreed to speak at a women's conference out West on the topic of contentment, I had no idea I'd be battling depression. If I'd known, I would've thought twice about committing.

Choosing a topic for a bunch of strangers is tricky business even without depression. It's even trickier when a coordinator wants me to announce my topic months before I'm ready to pick one. I've actually received publicity brochures in the mail detailing my talks long before I've written them. I'll read the descriptions and think, *Hmm, I'd like to hear that.*

I love connecting with women, but when I land at a

I'm not even sure I knew what hope was until I lost it. Before then, life was full of possibilities.

retreat, I'm typically going in blind. I'll stand at the podium and look out over the sea of unfamiliar faces and think, *I wonder what they're all retreating from.* Would they tell me stories of cruddy jobs or cranky spouses? Would they tell me how tough it was just getting away for the weekend? Or would they tell me it's a great day, and they're ready to celebrate the good things in life, like caramel lattes and girlfriends?

What kids?

One thing I can count on, though, wherever I'm booked to speak, the moment a topic is chosen, I know I'm going to get worked over by it, just a bit. It's God's way of keeping me real and giving me something worthwhile to say to the strangers who are obviously not strangers to Him.

And it happens every time. If I'm speaking on the topic of contentment, I suddenly have none. If I'm speaking on discernment, I can't figure anything out. If I'm asked to address the power of self-control, I become the kitchen magnet that reads, "Lead me not into temptation, I can find it myself."

A few years ago, for instance, my kids were driving me crazy right around the time I was asked to speak at a moms' event at a large contemporary church. I sat at my computer trying to come up with some sort of outline that would inspire young moms, but all I could come up with was:

1. Don't have any more kids.
2. Quit while you're ahead.
3. Bigger kids, bigger problems.

(Let's close in prayer.)

Depression can show up very quickly, usually after a crisis. But for me, depression crept up almost imperceptibly, generously offering a front row seat to the world of discontentment. All the things that used to bring me pleasure suddenly offered none. I'm not even sure I knew what hope was until I lost it. Before then, life was full of possibilities.

Then one day, while he was home from college and grabbing milk from the fridge, my son suddenly stopped and looked at me and said, "Mom, you gotta get a grip."

That's when I realized I'd been crying for six months. Maybe I did have a problem.

This Could Be Trouble

Not that a person needs to be depressed to feel discontent. For me, though, depression and discontentment fit together beautifully. They bonded instantly. Depression became rocket fuel for my discontentment, exposing every unsatisfied inch of my life. Then, to make matters worse, guilt showed up. I knew I should be grateful. Clearly, I had more than some. But those thoughts didn't help. They only irritated me more.

UNSATISFIED

It was all very unpleasant, but I will say this: going through the process taught me something very interesting about unhappy people. Like it or not, we can be extremely self-absorbed. Discontentment often signals an unhealthy preoccupation with one's self (although that preoccupation can be a good thing if it helps us recognize areas of our lives that need improvement).

After my depression lifted, I went through a kind of honeymoon period where nothing seemed to bother me. Life was good. I felt immune to problems. It was like the rush of new love—the kind I watched a boy have for my daughter right around that same time.

One evening, braving a particularly treacherous snowstorm, he appeared at our front door shivering from head to toe. The poor lovesick kid. He was in school full-time and worked lots of hours, but somehow, he was always at our house. I'm not sure when he slept. As he kicked off his shoes, I felt compelled to warn him that my daughter had been nursing a head cold. She was a walking petri dish. It wasn't pretty. She'd been carrying around a box of tissues with her all day . . . wandering from room to room, infecting every doorknob.

But the boy only smiled, shrugged his shoulders, and said, "I don't care." Then he bolted down to the TV room, leaping three steps at a time, where he found my daughter wrapped in a quilt and blowing her nose.

I stood there for a moment wondering what becomes of

those delirious days of new love. After thirty years of marriage, when my husband or I catch a cold, we stack enough pillows between us to reach the ceiling. I'm not sure of the science behind it, but we figure if we can't stop the germs altogether, maybe we can disorient them.

When my depression ended, I became the emotional equivalent of a star-crossed newlywed—all sweetness and smiles. But eventually I sensed the honeymoon coming to an end. As life came back into focus, I found myself counting the cost of what I'd just been through.

Maybe I'd need to rethink this thing called contentment, even though I'd been speaking on it for years. Maybe I'd need to revisit the Bible verse I'd always wanted to believe: "Delight yourself in the Lord, and He will give you the desires of your heart" (Psalm 37:4 ESV).

What did that even mean?

I suddenly realized how weary I'd become of platitudes and promises that felt empty. I'd grown skeptical of altar calls, emotional conversions, and, yes, self-help books. Those things may work for some but never have for me.

I was finding emotions to be highly unreliable. When stretched to the limit, they can make us see things and feel things that aren't even real. In contrast, the faith I was discovering in Scripture was deeper than that, grittier, and meant for the long haul. It was levelheaded and bolstered by reliable standards, like cutting-edge research and Harvard studies.

I'd already moved past the gaping hole that atheism had

created in me, along with the nagging suspicion that *if* God was there He probably didn't care. Still, I wanted to be clear about what I could expect from Him in terms of contentment. And what did He expect from me? Because even on our best days, when we're not facing divorce, job loss, or bankruptcy, life can still be tough.

Programmed for Problems

If we want to clear a path to a lasting contentment, figuring out why we struggle in the first place becomes really important. We need to see the obstacles before we can clear them. Sometimes the reasons are obvious, like searchlights in a black sky pointing out a potential shipwreck. Other times the reasons are subtle, slithering quietly into our lives like a poisonous snake waiting to strike. And the reasons are different for everyone, beginning with the fact that some of us just seem to be born more content than others. It's the gene pool we swim in.

When my son was little, I'd stick him in a stroller, hand him a cracker, and we'd spend hours walking through the mall. He'd amuse himself with my car keys or the mirror in the fitting room while I tried on a pile of sundresses. But when my daughter came along, she wouldn't stay in the stroller if her life depended on it, which it usually did by the end of our outing. I never knew why, and I'm not sure she did either, but like all discontented people, she just wanted *out*. Anyplace seemed better than where she was.

We didn't see the mall for two years.

When my niece, a mother of four, was pregnant with her first, like most new moms, she wanted to do everything by the book. She kept handy her copy of *What to Expect When You're Expecting* and did her best to create a womb full of happiness. She watched her diet, got plenty of exercise, avoided chemicals and undue stress. Nevertheless, when she gave birth, her beautiful newborn spent what felt like the entire first year of her life crying.

Sure, there were plenty of theories: an underdeveloped digestive system, sensitivity to hot and cold, a full moon. But no one ever really figured out why.

Then, right about the time things quieted down, my niece announced she was pregnant again. We held our collective breath. This time, though, she said she'd be doing things differently. She'd take it down a notch and enjoy juicy cheeseburgers, peanut M&Ms, and maybe even a glass of wine when the doctor said it was safe. And call it a coincidence, but when that little guy popped out, he was smiling, confirming the age-old saying, "If mama ain't happy, ain't nobody happy."

Life in the Bubble

The personalities we're born with make a huge difference in how we process life. So does the environment we're brought up in. When my kids were growing up, they knew

nothing of alcoholism, abuse, or dysfunction. When I was young, I didn't know those things existed either. Remarkably, my mom would tell you the same thing about her childhood.

That's *three* generations of bubble-wrapped living!

My mom's bubble was still intact even in her early teens. She was helping teach a Sunday school class and noticed a little boy who came in with a black eye. As he walked by, my mom asked what happened. Almost in passing, he answered, "My dad hit me."

My mom just assumed the boy was kidding. The idea that parents might actually harm their own children was so foreign to her, his words didn't even register. Later, though, when she learned some parents do hurt their kids, the boy's face began to haunt her. She never forgot it.

It's a painful moment when we discover how tough the world can be, especially when we're playing nice and following the rules. After years of living in my delightful bubble, I made up for lost time when I developed a nasty panic disorder in college. It dug its claws into my life and tormented me for thirteen years.

My home life was great, but college life was even better. Frat houses. Designer jeans. Really cute boys. But happy hour came to a screeching halt the moment I had my first panic attack. I was terrified and became desperate for answers when everything I thought I knew suddenly shifted.

What was wrong with me? And where was God?

Several doctors, counselors, and pastors later, I finally found my answers. And looking back now, I can see the purpose of my struggle. It had a very refining impact on me and changed the trajectory of my life. (Easy to say now.) It also taught me that even in our worst moments, God still has our back. And when we learn how to recognize the bad things for what they are, the better we can become at maximizing the good.

The Expert

Struggling with a panic disorder made me more of an expert on anxiety, depression, and despair than I ever cared to be. You become a “scholar” in one of two ways: in the classroom or in the trenches. I spent plenty of time in both. By now, you could say I’m a bit of an authority when it comes to fear and doubt.

For years I lived with my humiliating affliction and just assumed I was one of “those” people. Not too strong. Not too bright. Then, when I was finally diagnosed and treated by a very heads-up internist, I realized I wasn’t crazy. I wasn’t weak either. In fact, my doctor told me it was quite the opposite. He said it had taken enormous strength to press through my panic disorder the way I did. And now, if I can give that same encouragement to someone else who’s struggling, well, it almost makes the pain worthwhile.

I survived because I had a solid support system in place, and I opted for healthier solutions, like jogging rather than drinking. But it was always a battle. And when I finally learned there wasn't anything *really* wrong with me, it was like meeting myself for the first time.

We create all sorts of false narratives in our lives, and it's natural to assume the worst about ourselves when we're struggling. We wonder if we brought the problems on ourselves or if maybe we could have avoided them somehow.

And negative thoughts can be addicting. All those creative brain cells, the ones that used to be so helpful, suddenly turn on us. The chemicals get out of balance and the synapse wires get crossed.

But our struggle doesn't necessarily mean there's something wrong with us. It could just mean there's something wrong with the way we've been doing things. And if what we're doing isn't working—*news flash!*—it's time to try something else.

Heartburn

Most of us live our lives somewhere between completely clueless and totally overwhelmed. Understanding where we come from and what's going on around us is an important part of our personal equation. This is the kind of information we need if we're ready to chart a new course.

Twenty years of working with women has shown me lots

of ways behaviors are learned or inherited. Our tendencies toward depression and anxiety are often genetic, whereas resentment and intolerance are typically modeled. Understanding our own dynamics

Life is a journey, and contentment is all about heading in the right direction.

of “nature vs. nurture” can give us an entirely new set of tools to work with as we confront our discontent.

I’ve heard Woody Allen talk about our need for the power of distraction. “The best you can do to get through life is distraction. . . . The key is to distract yourself.”¹ A new romance, a good movie, a creative moment, Allen says we can distract ourselves in a “billion” different ways.

At first, I used to view Allen’s comments as negative—almost futile. Then, after processing a little more life, I found myself rethinking his words. Perhaps I’d been a bit hasty.

For some, discontentment will come and go like heartburn after a spicy taco. But for those of us who battle stubborn moments of discontentment and unhappiness, Allen’s advice is insightful. A good distraction may be all the antacid we need. Finding things that can distract us, preferably things that are healthy and legal, may be all we need to pull our minds out of their temporary funk.

And it should be something fun—or at least useful. Something that will pay dividends later, such as when I first started blogging. I thought, *Who besides my mother will*

even see this? But it kept me busy, and two years later I had fabulous material for a second book.

Here's the thing. Life is a journey, and contentment is all about heading in the right direction. Happiness is a byproduct of doing the right thing, though there's no guarantee that every step of the journey will *feel* good. Sometimes we need to get comfortable with being uncomfortable, at least for a while. For most of us, anxiety, anger, or sadness will come and go. But if we're on the right track, we'll eventually get where we need to go.

Empty Spaces

Discontentment not only exposes our weaknesses but also reveals the empty places inside of us. Learning to fill those spaces with good things is an important life skill for people who struggle with discontent. But again, the art of “healthy diversion” comes easier to some than others.

My husband has always been good at puttering. Instead of stewing over a disappointment, he finds a project to busy himself with while he processes his pain. The result is usually something we all benefit from, like updated landscaping, a new ceiling, or his famous raspberry jam.

The differences between his “tendencies” and mine became glaringly apparent several years ago. After decades of living in large houses with big closets and oversized bathrooms, it was time to start thinking about downsizing.

The handwriting was on the wall. Our nation's financial bubble had burst, our kids were in college, and the tax rates in Illinois continued to increase whether our square footage was being used or not.

We figured it would take a while for our house to sell, so we put it on the market right away—long before I was ready. And wouldn't you know, the thing sold immediately, which thrilled my husband but left me feeling homeless.

Technically, we were homeless, for a few months, as we looked at houses and even considered renting. But nothing appealed to me. Because the truth is, I wasn't ready to downsize my house, my family, or anything else in my life. So, while I busied myself with bitterness and self-pity, my husband took the reins and talked me into a modest short sale that was in desperate need of repair.

I cringed as the Realtor walked us through the place, but the skilled handyman in my husband glowed with the possibilities. In the days and weeks that followed, I watched him channel his inner Chip and Joanna, knocking down walls and yanking up floorboards. He completely transformed the place and was energized by every upgrade he made. Not only would the little house be cozy and affordable with its huge tax reduction but would also sell quickly when the time was right.

But for me, the entire process only exposed my own moldy floorboards. My sense of contentment was constantly tested as I tried to adjust to small spaces and virtually no

storage. And I failed miserably at it. I remember wondering how it was I'd become so spoiled. I thought I was a generous person. I thought I was a grateful person. I knew I was better off than most, though I've never understood why we should find solace in knowing that others have it worse than we do. Maybe I needed to learn a few things about being generous and taking fewer things for granted. Like my taste buds, which I always tend to forget about until I'm stuffed up with a head cold and lose all sense of taste and smell. It's then that I come to appreciate those little buds that cover my tongue, the ones I forgot are there.

I tried very hard to remain open and teachable as each wall of entitlement came crashing down around me. And, eventually, I made a startling discovery. Downsizing was far more liberating than I ever thought it could be. In fact, it seemed that the more stuff I got rid of, the clearer my head became. It was like coming home from the dentist after a good flossing and cleaning. But it also left me wondering how many other areas of my life needed the same kind of attention. Maybe there were better ways to look at my disappointments.

Equal Opportunity Offender

Another interesting factoid about discontentment is that it doesn't discriminate. Recently I read an NPR article on immigrants desperate to reach American soil. They, too, want the opportunity to find contentment and live out the

American Dream, though that dream seems to have taken a bit of a hit.

The article pointed out that for the first time in decades, life expectancy in America has dipped. And the new demographic most at risk? Surprisingly, white middle-aged men—the group that has typically had the edge in recent decades.

Shocked by the statistics, Princeton researchers explored the findings, and what they discovered was unsettling. The mortality rate in the United States had been falling by 2 percent annually since the 1970s. But an uptick in suicide among middle-aged white men, mainly due to drug and alcohol abuse, had changed the numbers. The newest drug of choice was coming from the opioid family, specifically prescription painkillers. And while the researchers didn't necessarily think the medical community was intentionally playing fast and loose with our discomfort, the potential for abuse was staggering, especially for those whose pain extended beyond their bodies.

Usually when we think about mood swings or insecurities, we picture sulking, angst-ridden teenagers. But according to the article, it's their fathers we should perhaps start worrying about. Also, the researchers discovered that this troubling trend isn't seen in the African American or Hispanic communities. It's mainly in the Caucasian population.

“Something's clearly going wrong with this age group in America,” says John Haaga, director of social research at the National Institute on Aging.²

Professor Jon Skinner of Dartmouth has offered an interesting take on these statistics too. One explanation is that things had been going well for white men and their parents in America, but then the bubble burst. The financial floor dropped out in 2008, and expectations were left unmet. But for nonwhite households, things had never been that optimistic in the first place, according to Skinner, so maybe that's why the disappointment among that demographic wasn't as great.

As I read the article, I wasn't sure which part of Skinner's comments were more troubling—the fact that white middle-aged men have taken a major hit, including the white middle-aged man I was married to, or that nonwhite men live without optimism.

And what exactly is the moral to this story, if there is one? Should we aim low in life to avoid disappointment? This kind of talk is hardly the stuff motivational speeches are made of. What sells books and fills stadiums are the pearly white smiles of speakers who collectively tell us to set the bar higher. But aren't unmet expectations what get us in trouble in the first place?

For many, the American Dream has morphed from humble gratitude to insatiable demand. I've seen it happen to others, and I've seen it happen to me. Much more was renovated than our little short sale.

DARE TO FIND CONTENTMENT IN AN UNHAPPY WORLD.

You should be happy, like everyone else (it seems). But you feel so unsatisfied and unhappy. Maybe because we are in an epic battle to find contentment in a culture that's defined by social media. Maybe we need permission to feel imperfect. In *Unsatisfied*, Ann C. Sullivan shoots from the hip, with contagious writing and an honest approach. She sorts through the reasons for our frustrations by:

- Unraveling our cultural definition of fulfillment.
- Identifying the empty spaces the comparison game leaves behind.
- Connecting the dots that lead to genuine contentment.

Unsatisfied dares to wonder where God is when life doesn't go exactly as planned. And it dares you to believe that He is closer than you think.



Ann C. Sullivan is a celebrated author, international speaker, blogger, and freelance writer. Her articles have been included in *Christianity Today* and *Relevant* magazine. She graduated from Northern Illinois University where she studied education, history, and philosophy. Sullivan worked more than ten years coordinating women's studies outside of Milwaukee before expanding her speaking to include the corporate world. She remains passionate about inspiring men and women in all areas of their lives. Read more at anncsullivan.com.

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