Peace Is a Practice
An Invitation to Breathe Deep and Find a New Rhythm for Life

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PREFACE
For most of my life, I lived with undiagnosed autism.

I spent years living with a struggle without a name. Throughout daily life, a pendulum in my mind swung back and forth between these two thoughts: “I think there’s something wrong with me, and I need to figure out what to do with myself,” and, “I think something’s wrong with me, and I need help . . .”

When I was twenty-seven, I finally had just enough courage to ask my primary care doctor for advice on pursuing an autism diagnosis.

Throughout my childhood, my parents had wondered if I might be on the autism spectrum, but after asking doctors over the years, they were told there was nothing to worry about. I would later find out that most of the studies on autism have been done with boys, so sometimes girls have an incredibly hard time getting support in pursuit of an autism diagnosis.

As I sat there under the blinking fluorescent light, slowly lifting my gaze from the brown tile floor, I finally let out the words, “Do you have any suggestions for who I could talk to about autism spectrum disorder? I think I could be on the spectrum.”

Without even looking up from his clipboard, my doctor spouted out confidently, “You have nothing to worry about. You’re perfectly normal.”

Sadly, I left that room believing him. The pendulum in my mind swung back again: “I guess I need to figure this out myself.”

I spent the next few years trying to do just that.
It wasn’t until years later that I discovered videos of women talking about their experiences with getting diagnosed with autism as adults. I sat there in awe as I listened. I felt as though they were describing my whole life. Through those videos, I found the courage to seek help again. I ended up finding a specialist in my area and was finally able to talk to someone for the first time.

Autism spectrum disorder is a developmental disorder, and the range of symptoms varies widely. The word *spectrum* is important when it comes to autism because it looks different person to person. Signs of autism begin during early childhood and typically last throughout adulthood. Autism can affect everything in daily life, from how someone socializes and communicates to how they learn and function. My own diagnosis includes a sensory processing disorder, which in my case means something as simple as the texture of clothing or a bright light can have a profound impact on me and my ability to process and be present in the moment.

For years I have been incredibly hard on myself for having these sensitivities. When I was a touring musician, sometimes I would walk off stage ready to cry and didn’t know why. I felt overwhelmed physically, even when I felt fine emotionally. Now I’ve realized that the high volume from the massive speakers and the sound of all the instruments was wearing me down minute by minute.

My life has been filled with stories like this. From as early as I can remember all the way into being an adult, I have had moments when I felt ready to shut down, but I had no idea why. Moments when I would go into a bathroom and sit in the stall just to have a moment of silence. Moments when I would run and hide and retreat to a dark place just to get my heart rate down.

I would also have moments when I would go outside and just stare at the wide-open sky.
I would sit on the front porch of my childhood home and carefully observe the rocks scattered around my feet.

I would go to the nearest pine tree and grab hold of the bark and just stand there for a while.

I would pull out my sketchbook and doodle my way into the margins.

I would sit at the kitchen table and scribble out poetry.

I would sing.

I would practice peace.

When the specialist officially gave me my diagnosis, which was rather long and was certainly a lot to take in, the last thing she said was, “And it’s not your fault.”

Before she came into the room, I had been gripping the pillow on the couch the entire time. As she said those words, I loosened my grip, and with this loosened grip came at least a decade’s worth of tears. For so long I had struggled with everyday tasks that I felt I should be able to do. I had told myself it was all on me to manage the daily stresses and anxieties I faced. Somewhere along the way, I had decided to carry the weight of everything I struggled with on my shoulders. Every friendship I had struggled to maintain. Every job I struggled to keep. Every social situation where I had to plan out topics in advance only to walk away feeling like I didn’t say what I meant to. Every time I struggled to be present in a group of people. But now I was seeing my struggles differently. Yes, I struggled . . . and it was okay. I didn’t have to carry it all. I didn’t have to hold it all in.

I also discovered as I looked back over my life, even though it was hard to see it at the time, I breathed through all those difficult moments, one inhale, one exhale at a time. Over and over, through the mountains and valleys of my life, I made my way through breath cycles, too many to count. The challenges I
face made it difficult to be in the moment, and at the same time, I learned that just being able to breathe was a way into peace ... and this was a miraculous thing.

From the hopeful blueness of the sky, to the strength of the pine tree’s bark, to the blank pages that invited me to fill them after a long day—these were ways that, while I struggled, I also learned to breathe. While I was trying to pace myself through the unknown, I was also practicing peace.
PEACE IS A PRACTICE
The word *peace* first caught my attention as a child when I heard the song “It Is Well with My Soul.”

When peace like a river, attendeth my way,
When sorrows like sea billows roll;
Whatever my lot, thou hast taught me to say,
It is well, it is well, with my soul.

From that moment forward, I associated the word *peace* with a river, a beautiful yet powerful watercourse I had never seen with my own eyes, but it was a place I longed for. Because I struggled to fit in and feel at home in the world around me, the idea of peace drew me in. I was hungry for the green leaves that sheltered the river and thirsty for the water that flowed throughout. When I learned the story behind the song, my association deepened even more.

Horatio Spafford’s four daughters died in a shipwreck while crossing the Atlantic. When he crossed the same ocean to join his grieving wife, who had survived the wreck, he penned the words to this song.

He had known peace to be like a river in his life, and sorrows to be like the sea. He had known more than one body of water. And for him, they meant different things.
As a young girl, I too associated the sea with sorrow. I learned of the slave trade that brought my ancestors over the Atlantic. The architectural plans in history books of their bodies lined up below the deck created a lump in my throat. If slaves grew ill or did not comply with the enslaver in some way, they were thrown overboard to their death. My stomach tightened at this knowledge. I still can’t look to the Atlantic Ocean without thinking of them.

In contrast, the river was a symbol of freedom and peace for my soul. I could feel this meaning in the Negro spirituals I sang as a child. All by grace, these songs have survived and traveled down through the generations. Through years of enslavement and relentless oppression, songs like “Deep River” became a part of the tradition:

Deep river, my home is over Jordan . . .
Oh, don’t you want to go to that gospel feast,
That promised land where all is peace?

The author of this song, and many others like it, remains unknown. I don’t have the privilege of knowing the authors’ individual stories. But I can feel the collective longing for peace beneath my skin, generations later.

As the song suggests, “peace” still exists within the question mark, not on the other side. Questions about justice, safety, healing, hope. Questions that make us wonder, “Will we ever be truly free?”

We’re still desperate to reach that deep river. We’re still desperate for peace.

Peace is a state of mind, heart, body, and soul. It is the freedom to breathe, even in the face of great challenges and chaos. Peace is the river in the desert, not on the other side of it.

Peace Is a Practice
Today I am still seeking that river. And not just a river far off somewhere that I must arrive at, but the river that runs wild and free in my inner life. The river that carves its way through my need for understanding and reminds me to slow down and breathe.

My senses strive for the smallest taste of peace in the morning’s dewy air. The steam lifting above poured tea. The way the house settles back into place after a freight train rolls by. Why? Because it is precisely that moment in the day when I return to the present moment. It is there I realize that when the walls shake, the ground is still steady beneath. My body finds the resolve it naturally seeks.

These are small things, yes, but in times lined with uncertainty, they remind me of the bigger things. They remind me that I can be aware of this very moment, no matter my fears of the future and no matter what I am wrestling from the past.

I am free to slow down long enough to reflect on what is true. I don’t know what lies ahead, but I stand on the shoulders of those who came before me. The strength of my great-great-grandfather who was born a slave and died free. My parents, who taught me to sing songs of peace. The painters and poets who created openly and widely, never knowing of me. The teenage girl transformed by what they made—quietly taking in their work as I stood in the narrow gaps between the shelves at the local library. It was in that small space that I found freedom to breathe.

This is what peace means to me.

I have played around with the phrases finding peace and seeking peace and peace beyond understanding in my art and poetry. And not just because they fit nicely. I hope that for whoever is on the other side of that phrase, it reminds them to exhale, right in the middle of the uncertainty. For even when we haven’t yet seen the other side of the issues we’re facing, we are still worthy of breathing deep and knowing peace right here amid them.
I write this way because I am desperate for peace. And I have a feeling you might be too.

This book is about learning to seek peace in daily life. It’s about realizing we are worthy of peace. And it starts right here: with a deep inhale and a hold-nothing-back exhale as you ground yourself in the grace of the present. You don’t have to arrive at your picture-perfect life before you can know peace. The river is here for you now, wherever you are.

I believe grasping peace is important because, more and more, I feel the tension rising. And you probably feel it too. We are thirsty for the river and hungry for the fruit that grows around its bend, but all around and within, all we see are floodwaters. Everything seems to tremble with chaos.

What new problems will rise to the surface today?
What will the headlines read?
What systems and structures are failing vulnerable people?
Who can we trust?

A lot is being uncovered right now. Can’t we just get it all out of the way? Can’t we just have all the difficult conversations we need to have right now? Will there come a time when we are able to experience one big exhale and that’s enough? Will we finally see real change? Will we experience peace collectively?

And then there are all the questions you’re holding within. You’re trying to figure out how to breathe through all the uncertainty. You’re trying to learn how to be present amid the tension. You want to say what your heart wants to say, but is that safe? You want to find the courage to be fully present to others and to love them well, but will that be enough? You feel a stirring inside you to take up space, but in an anxious world, is that okay?

Often it seems where one part of the world is calm, something is shaken up in another. When you feel content and joyful, you
check in with a friend, and she is anxious and overwhelmed. You fix one thing, and something else falls apart. You sit down for a meal and try to forget everything for a moment, but the weight of all that happened that day is as strong as an earthquake. It rocks the ceiling, the floor, the cups, and the plates. It creates tsunamis, physical ones and inner ones. Everything gets shaken up. Suffering is widespread. Fear boils in the underbelly of conversations with your relatives and the ones you have with yourself. You wonder when the volcano will finally erupt. You wonder, “Where is the river?”

What I have learned in writing poetry and making art about peace over the past few years is that peace is a practice. The word practice means “to carry out,” and peace is a way of living that we can carry out each day—maybe not everywhere all at once, but we can learn to find peace and live in its presence.

The people who came before us faced many troubles. And yet they continued to sing, march, dance, cook, nurture, vote, and create. We can practice living in the same way. We can contribute to the flow. We don’t have to figure it out all at once to know we are free. Free to approach each day being present with every breath we breathe, every word we speak. We have the opportunity to sow seeds of life and water them daily. We can practice peace.

I have also learned that peace does not mean the annihilation of discomfort. Peace is not complicit or passive. As sure as you can hear a mighty river rushing from miles away, peace roars its cry for justice. Peace is a constant flow of sacred truth. “Blessed are the peacemakers” (Matthew 5:9)—humbling, eternal words, carved through the wild, centuries after they were spoken. Peace is an invitation in daily life to breathe deep, right here, in the uncertainty.
Breathe free.
Through complicated histories
and deeply rooted mysteries,
let us practice peace.
Let us live it out day by day, breath by breath.
Peace:
above, beneath, all around, and within.
Let us pursue peace, together,
for the living, breathing flow that it is.

If nothing else, I hope this book encourages you to pursue peace right here, right now. I hope you leave this book having cultivated an imagination for what peace looks like in daily life. It is my hope that in the spaces where you hunger for justice, you can sow seeds of restoration. Where you thirst for answers, you can drink of calm waters. Where your whole being craves a resolve, each breath you breathe reminds you of the path beneath your feet. And not every breath has to be perfect. The river does not flow in a straight line, and the current is prone to change. But the water still flows. And you are free to practice peace.

Peace is a river that the soul longs for.
Peace is also a practice available to us, right here, in everyday life.

**Peace Is a Practice**

Late one summer my family traveled a few hours south to Savannah, Georgia, where we visited the historical First African Baptist Church, which is also a museum. The sun beamed brightly above us, and the August humidity sent me rushing to get indoors. As I reached the top of the steps, out of breath, and opened the
red door, I immediately knew something was different about this place. The lights were off and the air was cool. The sanctuary was quiet as the tour guide led our group to the basement. Here I learned that “beneath the wooden floor, builders left a space four feet tall, large enough to hide hundreds of slaves following the Savannah River to freedom. They punctured holes in the floor in the cross-and-diamond shape of an African prayer symbol.”

This would have occurred during the time of the Underground Railroad, a network of people working to create secret and safe pathways for runaway slaves to escape to freedom, and “it is believed that the drilled pattern functioned as breathing holes for runaway slaves who, hiding under the floor, awaited safe transport north.”

For the runaway slave in the South, the mere act of breathing in the wrong place was a death sentence.

I stood there, suddenly hyperaware of the deep breaths I was free to take. I tried to imagine what it might be like to try to breathe through the centuries-old holes drilled beneath my feet, my body pressed against others, eager to be free, knowing that because I was in a Black body, my freedom was a crime. Unlike the railroad up the street from my house, I’m sure that the Underground Railroad would have been something I was grateful for. But still, there had to be moments when the weight of it all was too much. My shoulders tensed up at the thought of how these small holes in the floor didn’t seem like enough room to breathe.

Our tour guide shared knowledge with us that you can also find on the “History” section of the First African Baptist Church’s website: “The holes in the floor are in the shape of an African prayer symbol known to some as the BaKongo Cosmogram. In parts of Africa, it also means ‘Flash of the Spirits’ and represents birth, life, death, and rebirth.”
Rebirth.

I let the word rise like its own miniature sunrise on my tongue. My shoulders loosened ever so slightly. They loosened at the reality that amid all the uncertainty these slaves faced, they looked up and saw something familiar. I was reminded of Monica A. Coleman’s words on rebirth in her book *Bipolar Faith*: “My rebirths are not as dramatic as in human biology. . . . I feel it internally, like snapping a twig underfoot on a nature hike or the sunrise turning from orange to pink. . . . Rebirth is the surety that I am more than this. I am more than this. I am more than this.”

These slaves had no idea what their tomorrow held, and yet, in the smallest way, there was breathing room. Every exhale, an act of faith all on its own. “There is more than this.”

To practice peace is to take action. To practice peace is to drill breathing holes in the church floor for those seeking freedom. It is to look for ceremonial pauses between a song’s verses. It is to let ourselves be present when the windows shake and the train rolls by. Over and over again. It is realizing that life is not about fixing or solving problems on our own. We are connected to a larger, greater network, and the best way forward is to stay focused to work we can do together. And we can take action by asking ourselves questions like this:

What can I learn right here?
What can I pay attention to right now?
What invitations are disguised as interruptions?

Even if we can’t fix life’s challenges all at once, we can create breathing room, a new way of life.
There is peace to be found.
And it starts not in our heads but right here, on the ground.

*Peace Is a Practice*