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DONALD MILLER

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Glennon Melton, author, Carry On, Warrior and creator, Momastery
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Henry Cloud, author, *Boundaries*

“Some authors I love because they’re real, others because they’re inspiring. Donald Miller is both. He has a way of drawing you into the narrative and then *bam!*, hits you with a truth you never saw coming. *Scary Close* will leave you feeling enlightened and refreshed and will change your relationships for the better.”

Korie Robertson, *Duck Dynasty*
Scary Close
Also by Donald Miller

A Million Miles in a Thousand Years

Blue Like Jazz

Searching for God Knows What
Dropping the Act and Finding True Intimacy

Donald Miller
To Elizabeth Miller
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Foreword

by Bob Goff

WE’RE ALL AMATEURS WHEN IT COMES TO LOVE and relationships. I’ve never seen anyone go professional, or wear a relationship jacket with stickers all over it from corporate sponsors like a NASCAR driver. They’ll never make an Olympic event out of relationships either, although I can’t lie, I’d like to see it in the winter games. We’ve let magazines on the end caps of our grocery stores, movies at our theaters, and old boyfriends and girlfriends who have failed us do most of the talking. Not surprisingly, we’ve ended up with a distorted idea not only of who we are, but also of what it means to love well.
Foreword

Don Miller is one of my closest friends. I know that he loves me because he’s told me. But even if he hadn’t said a word, I’d know Don loved me because I have experienced how Don has treated me during times of tremendous joy, paralyzing sadness, and lingering uncertainty. In a word, He’s been “with” me.

A number of years ago, Don and I went to Gulu, Uganda together. Uganda’s civil war with the Lord’s Resistance Army was still raging at the time and over a million people who had been displaced from their homes were living in displacement camps with no social services and very little security. When we arrived in Northern Uganda, we didn’t stay in a hotel; we stayed in a camp with 38,000 displaced people. It was certainly more than a little unsettling. Abductions were still happening in the region by the LRA fighters. Most of these kidnappings were taking place in the displacement camps.

It was late in the evening before Don and I left the warm fire and conversation with leaders from the camp. In the dark, we made our way to the hut we were staying in. There wouldn’t be any way to protect ourselves against any intruder who meant us harm. After ducking into a small opening in the hut, without saying a word, Don rolled out his mat in front of the door. They’d have to get by him to get to anyone else. Good friends do
that; they guard each other when things get scary by putting themselves in between their friends and what could harm them. Don wrote this book with much the same in mind.

I GET A LOT OF MAIL. I BET YOU DO TOO. MOST OF mine is from people I know, but I get a fair amount of junk mail too. Before I open any of it, I check the return addresses to see if the mail is from someone I know and trust. Some of my junk mail is obvious and easy to pull from the pile and get rid of without reading it, but a lot of it pretends to look like it’s not junk. Sometimes it’s hard to tell the difference. The same is true in our relationships. This book will help you sort the junk mail you’ve been bringing to your relationships.

But if you’re looking for a book with steps in it, this isn’t the one for you. Don writes with intellectual honesty and sometimes-painful transparency about his own life. He’s found honesty and transparency to be helpful guides. Don isn’t asking us to agree with him about what he’s experienced; however, he’s challenged more than a few of my assumptions about what makes for good relationships and I’m better for it.

Don and I have spoken at quite a few events together over the years. The most difficult part for me is never
who I'm talking to or what I'm talking about—it's introducing Don. If you can believe it, I've never made it a single time through introducing Don without getting choked up. I'm not really sure why. I think it's because I love Don and love makes us both strong and weak at the same time. I love who Don is, I love who he's becoming, and I am grateful for a guy who will put himself between me and what scares me the most, even if it costs him a lot.

Let me introduce you to my friend, Don Miller. And yes, I'm crying.
Author’s Note

SOMEBODY ONCE TOLD ME WE WILL NEVER FEEL loved until we drop the act, until we’re willing to show our true selves to the people around us.

When I heard that I knew it was true. I’d spent a good bit of my life as an actor, getting people to clap—but the applause only made me want more applause. I didn’t act in a theater or anything. I’m talking about real life.

The thought of not acting pressed on me like a terror. Can we really trust people to love us just as we are?
Author’s Note

Nobody steps onto a stage and gets a standing ovation for being human. You have to sing or dance or something.

I think that’s the difference between being loved and making people clap, though. Love can’t be earned, it can only be given. And it can only be exchanged by people who are completely true with each other.

I shouldn’t pretend to be an expert, though. I didn’t get married until I was forty-two, which is how long it took me to risk being myself with another human being.

Here are two things I found taking the long road, though:

Applause is a quick fix. And love is an acquired taste.

Sincerely,
Donald Miller
Three Things I Learned About Relationships From Swimming in a Pond

BACK IN ASHEVILLE BETSY AND I ENDED UP HAVING a great weekend. I rented a convertible in town and we visited the Biltmore Mansion and spent some time at Malaprop’s Bookstore. We ate at Curate, a new restaurant
where we taught the bartender to make a drink with whiskey, vermouth, and orange bitters. He liked it so much he said he might make it their fall cocktail. If you go to Curate, ask for the Don and Betsy.

The rest of the time we laid around by the pond and read our friend Shauna Niequist’s book *Bread and Wine* and wondered what it would be like to someday own a bed-and-breakfast where we cooked all the recipes from Shauna’s book. Shauna makes everything sound easy, including marriage, family, and pasta.

I’d be lying if I said our weekend in the mountains wasn’t hard. I was used to being in DC, where I could go back to my apartment after our dates, sit around in my boxers, and watch television. In Asheville Betsy and I never left each other. What made me most uncomfortable were the awkward silences. Betsy says they’re never awkward for her, but they are for me. When there’s a silence in the conversation I feel like it’s my responsibility to fill it. It’s work, you know. I kept reminding myself the only way Betsy and I would make it is if I learned to trust her with those silences, if I learned to trust the reason she was marrying me wasn’t to be entertained but to exchange love—that long, boring love that happens when a couple quietly eats cereal together while they read the paper.

After I dropped Betsy off at the airport I stopped at
Krispy Kreme for a doughnut. When I get nervous I eat sugar. I don’t know what I was nervous about except the fear that I was about to commit to a lifetime of awkward silences.

The downside of being a writer is you get plenty of time to overthink your life. I like what Viktor Frankl wrote, about how we aren’t designed to spend too much time thinking about ourselves, that we are healthier when we’re distracted by a noble cause. But what do you do when the noble cause is a memoir? You sit around and think about yourself too much.

The only positive distraction I had in Asheville was the pond. Each day I’d go down and take a swim, letting the water distract me from my thoughts.

Thing One: To Be Intimate
I’d Have to Jump

I WAS ON THE DOCK ONE AFTERNOON WHEN SOMETHING happened that helped me. From the dock you can look across the pond toward the mountains and it’s beautiful. Water collects in a massive bowl of trees and rock that empties into the pond at the far end. There are no visible houses for miles and there’s an echo about the place that confused my dog, Lucy, so badly she’d spend nearly every morning barking a conversation with
herself. The pond is deep, about twenty-five feet in the middle, and the forest reflects on the surface so vividly it feels as though you could walk onto the water, as though it were the surface of a painting.

It was warm the evening Betsy left, and I wanted to take a swim. But as I walked to the end of the dock I felt a fear. I wanted to jump and didn’t want to jump at the same time. I’d felt it before, back when Betsy and I swam the afternoon she’d arrived, but I didn’t pay attention to it then. I just dove off the dock to impress her. But this time I studied the feeling. It reminded me of the fear I feel every year when I visit Bob’s lodge. There’s a cliff out in front of his house, about twenty-five feet or so, and every time I visit I make myself jump off, out past the rocks, into the water below. I never want to do it, but I feel like I have to. It’s my yearly test.

Jumping off a cliff is one thing, but having the same kind of fear about jumping off the end of the dock had me confused. The dock was only a few feet off the surface of the pond. And it’s not like the water was cold. I swam for an hour the day before. So why didn’t I want to jump? Why was I having the same feelings I’d had at Bob’s place, staring down from ten times the height?

Then it occurred to me what it was. I wasn’t afraid to jump or to swim or to feel the sudden coolness of
the water. I was afraid of change. On the dock I was warm and dry and in control. I knew once I jumped I’d be fine, I’d enjoy swimming around. But it was still a change. I thought about Betsy, likely about to land in DC. I knew in my heart I’d be happier with her. I knew she’d take me places that were healthier, more fun, more challenging than I’d ever been. I thought also about how content and comfortable I was being single, how much control I had in my life, how I could go out and get applause anytime I wanted and then retreat to the green room of my life, eating Oreos and waiting for my next performance.

I jumped off the dock. The water on the surface was cool and got colder as my body sank toward the bottom. I felt all the energy in the pond move into my muscles and when my head broke the surface it felt like a personal sunrise, as though the day were starting over. I breathed in the mountains and the trees and heard my splash come back at me from the hills. And the wind in the wooded bowl made the trees clap. I felt better in the water than I had on the dock. I thought about that, then, about how much I fear change, even change for the better. I thought about how there are so many lies in fear. So much deception. What else keeps us from living a better story than fear?

Later that week Bob asked me to Skype into his class
at Pepperdine Law School. The class was going through a life plan I’d created. I ended up Skyping in from the dock, the mountains and the cabin behind me in the video. I didn’t tell them about the pond, though. For all they knew I was teaching from a lawn chair on the front lawn. I taught for a while and then told them the latest lesson I’d learned, that in order to experience a meaningful life, I’d have to face the fear of jumping in—not just in relationships, but in life, in our careers and our rest and our play. Then, fully dressed, I set my computer on the edge of the dock and did a cannonball into the pond. The class loved it. I’m not sure what any of it had to do with practicing law, but what good is practicing law if we don’t love our lives?

Thing Two: Swimming a Little Is Swimming Enough

ONE OF THE REASONS I RENTED A CABIN WITH A pond is so I could get some exercise. I wanted to get into better shape before I got married. It’s a big pond, large enough for an Olympian to work out if he or she were willing to swim in a circle. It’s true that Betsy likes me how I am, but I do need to lose some weight and I figured swimming an hour or two a day would be enough to get started.
Three Things I Learned About Relationships . . .

The first day I swam I was terribly out of shape. I could only swim hard for ten minutes or so and then had to get out for a break. After about three ten-minute swims I was done. Humbling, for sure. It wasn’t long before I could swim a full workout, but I’d be lying if I said I enjoyed the routine. You’d think I’d be excited to get into shape, but I wasn’t. I don’t like to exercise, but not because it’s painful or tiring. I’ve climbed mountains in Peru and ridden my bike across America. I’m willing. The reason I don’t like exercise is because somewhere, in the deep recesses of my brain I’ve become convinced no amount of work is enough. I never leave a workout satisfied or proud of myself. And for that matter, I never quit a writing session thinking I’ve worked hard enough either. Or a teaching gig or a business meeting or anything else. I’m so bad about this I used to mow my lawn then crawl around on the grass with a pair of scissors, cutting uneven blades of grass. No kidding. I might have a problem.

There are really only two things a person can do when they’re that much of a perfectionist. They can either live in the torture and push themselves to excel, or they can quit. I tend to go back and forth between the torture of working too hard and the sloth of quitting.

The reason I bring this up has nothing to do with exercise or writing. I bring it up because it’s a symptom
of a bigger problem, a problem that is going to affect mine and Betsy’s relationship. The problem is this: those of us who are never satisfied with our accomplishments secretly believe nobody will love us unless we’re perfect. In the outer ring Bill was talking about, the ring that covers shame, we write the word perfect and attempt to use perfection to cover our shame. I had a friend once who used to mumble curse words every time she drove by her high school algebra teacher’s house because, years before, the teacher had given her a B-.

I think this all ties in with the entertainer gene. The root systems of these lies we tell ourselves tend to grow together. It’s all connected with the belief human love is conditional. But human love isn’t conditional. No love is conditional. If love is conditional, it’s just some sort of manipulation masquerading as love.

Another argument Betsy and I got in was strange, for sure. She’d told me she loved me and rather than saying, “Thanks” or “I love you too,” I made some kind of self-deprecating joke. She looked at me perturbed and ate another bite of her ice cream. I was offended that she didn’t laugh, so I repeated the joke just to frustrate her.

“It’s not funny,” she said.

“It is funny,” I said.

“No, Don,” she said straightly. “When I say I love
you and you don’t believe me, you’re being a jerk. Basically what you’re saying is I only love conditionally. You think you’re being self-deprecating and funny, but you’re really saying I’m not a good enough person to love you if you have a few flaws. It gets old.”

I thought about her having said that when I was beating myself up for not swimming hard enough. If I was going to make Betsy happy, I’d have to trust that my flaws were the ways through which I would receive grace. We don’t think of our flaws as the glue that binds us to the people we love, but they are. Grace only sticks to our imperfections. Those who can’t accept their imperfections can’t accept grace either.

I went back to the pond the next day. I jumped in and swam in a circle for twenty minutes or so, every muscle in my body burning. I stopped early and sat on the edge of the dock to catch my breath. I heard the voices, the deep feeling of dissatisfaction rising up. But this time I let it pass. Betsy needed me to be neither complacent nor perfectionistic. Those two poles were the death zones. So instead I congratulated myself on coming down to the dock to swim. I told myself the truth, that if I worked out a little every day for a year, I’d be in good shape. I asked myself if I wanted to keep working out. I didn’t. Instead, I swam around the pond and threw a tennis ball for Lucy. I taught her to jump off the dock and even
Scary Close

catch the ball in the air as she leaped into the water. And for the first time since I arrived at the cabin I felt relaxed. I wondered if Betsy wouldn’t be more happy married to a man who was relaxed than a man constantly feeling like he wasn’t working hard enough.

Thing Three: There Are More Lifeguards than Sharks

THE LAST THING I LEARNED ABOUT RELATIONSHIPS by swimming in the pond was there are more lifeguards than sharks. What I mean is, for the most part, other people aren’t out to get us.

This fear of intimacy isn’t something I was born with. When I was younger, even in high school, I could get quite close to people. In fact, some of the most intimate relationships I’ve enjoyed happened before I turned twenty-five. Since then it’s been hit-or-miss. I’m not sure how it happened, exactly, but I think it’s partly because I got mixed up with people who broke my trust. I’ve no awful stories to tell or anything, just a couple of bad business deals, a few scorekeeping relationships, and the occasional Twitter heckler. At some point, I just stopped trusting people. I began to believe everybody viewed life as a contest, a subtle version of Hunger Games. And to some degree I bought into the lie. If I
Three Things I Learned About Relationships . . .

needed somebody for something, I’d let myself get close but not too close, always keeping my parachute on.

I realized this was an issue I needed to work on just before I left DC. I was having lunch with my friend John Cotton Richmond. John is a human trafficking and civil rights prosecutor at the U.S. Department of Justice. He’s the lead guy in the country taking down bad guys, those who enslave children and refugees and sell them in sex-trafficking operations. John is also one of the best husbands and fathers I know. He’s like a real-life super-hero, prosecuting the world’s most evil criminals by day and kicking a soccer ball around with his kids the same night. And his wife adores him. He’s one of the guys I’m hoping will guide me through the next season of life.

One afternoon while we were eating barbecue at Hill Country, just down from his office, I told him I’d had something of a breakthrough. I said I didn’t think Betsy was out to get me. I said it seriously and with a straight face, but John started laughing. He nearly spit out his lemonade.

“Don, I would hope she’s not out to get you. She’s going to be your wife!”

I realized how absurd I sounded. I don’t suppose I meant it to be accusatory. I only meant to say I was having a revelation that maybe people weren’t as bad as I thought they were. And Betsy was likely the person who
was convincing me this was true. I clarified to John that in the past I had assumed a woman would eventually try to control me, try to use me for something. But I wasn’t sure people were really like that anymore. At least not all people. John laughed again. He looked down and shook his head, still smiling.

“I’m glad you had this revelation, Don,” he said. “And I agree with you.”

John paused in thought for a moment. “It’s a tough question, you know. The heart of man. I’ve prosecuted some evil people.” He looked at me sadly. “I’m talking about rapists and murderers. Leaders of child sex-trafficking rings. The works. And you want to know what they all have in common, Don?”

“What is it?” I asked.

“They all think people are out to get them. It’s causing me to wonder if distrust doesn’t bring out the worst in us. I know it’s a complicated issue, because nearly everybody I put in prison has been tragically abused and so it’s natural they don’t trust others and they see life as a kill-or-be-killed drama. But it makes me wonder about those of us who deal with the same issue in lesser percentages. I wonder about my own heart. Am I willing to be hurt occasionally and turn the other cheek in order to have a long-term, healthy relationship?”
Three Things I Learned About Relationships . . .

John looked me in the eye and said, “I think you’re on to something here, and it’s good. I think the risk of trusting Betsy is worth the reward of intimacy.”

Since talking to John that afternoon I’ve noticed something interesting. The harshest people I’ve met over the years have had two things in common: they don’t fully trust anybody, and they view relationships as a means to an end.

I read an article a few years ago about Apple Computers’ retail division and the way they do customer service. They want their team members to trust the “positive intent” of their customers. So when a customer comes in with a complaint, they don’t want their team members to assume they are trying to rip off the company or get something for free. They know the occasional loss will be offset by the connection they create with their customers by trusting them.

Trusting people is a slow and natural process, I know. But it’s already paying off. I’ve noticed the more I trust Betsy the gentler my own spirit becomes. My trust for her is changing me.

BEFORE BETSY LEFT THE CABIN WE WERE LYING ON the dock, looking at the clouds and having one of those awkward silences that are still difficult for me.
Thinking we had to talk to connect, I asked her if she’d rather swim in a pool, a lake, or the ocean. Betsy sat up, dangled her feet off the dock, and said she’d rather swim in the ocean. She grew up going to Florida with her cousins and they’d spend the entire day playing in the waves, poking jellyfish with sticks and eating peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwiches with sand in them. She and her cousins would lie in bed at night and giggle because they could feel their bodies lifting and falling as though they were still in the waves. Those were some of the greatest days of her life.

She asked whether I would rather swim in a pool, a lake, or the ocean. I said I’d rather swim in a lake. “Why?” she asked. I said in a lake you didn’t have to deal with the jellyfish and the seaweed and the sharks and whatever else. Betsy thought about that for a moment then reminded me that trying not to get stung by a jellyfish was part of the adventure.

Betsy ran her fingers through my hair and kissed me on the forehead. I told her I’d put some jellyfish in the pond if she wanted me to.

“It’s worth it to get stung by a jellyfish every once in a while,” Betsy said. “For the occasional sting, you get to go to sleep feeling the waves and you get to giggle with your cousins.”

I doubt she realized it, but she was talking about
much more than the ocean. She was talking about what it meant to risk yourself on love. It meant diving into the unknown, where there were very real dangers, but mostly rewards.
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