

**L O**  
**LOVE  
WITHOUT  
REASON**

**THE LOST ART OF GIVING A F♥CK**

**V E**

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*with* **Christa Bourg**

# Contents

<b>INTRODUCTION:</b> Why I Give a F♥ck	<b>1</b>
<b>CHAPTER 1:</b> How Giving a F♥ck Can Change Your Life	<b>9</b>
<b>CHAPTER 2:</b> Start with a Reset	<b>23</b>
<b>CHAPTER 3:</b> Micro-gestures Will Change the World	<b>39</b>
<b>CHAPTER 4:</b> The Energy Exchange	<b>57</b>
<b>CHAPTER 5:</b> Lessons from Skid Row	<b>73</b>
<b>CHAPTER 6:</b> Love Is a Discipline . . . and a Steeping	<b>89</b>
<b>CHAPTER 7:</b> When Love Is Labor	<b>107</b>
<b>CHAPTER 8:</b> Reset with Your Tribe	<b>123</b>
<b>CHAPTER 9:</b> Keep Choosing the Light	<b>137</b>
<b>APPENDIX</b>	<b>145</b>
<b>NOTES</b>	<b>155</b>
<b>ACKNOWLEDGMENTS</b>	<b>159</b>
<b>ABOUT THE AUTHOR</b>	<b>161</b>

# Introduction

## WHY I GIVE A F♥CK

*“Life’s most persistent and urgent question is,  
‘What are you doing for others?’”*

MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR., *“The Three Dimensions of a Complete Life”*

**W**e all have our own definitions of love that evolve from our unique experiences. Growing up I learned about love from my two moms: the woman I call “mom,” who was actually my grandmother, and my birth mom, with whom I no longer have a relationship. Born to a woman who didn’t love herself enough to understand how to love others, I spent most of my childhood in a physically and emotionally abusive home.

The experience muddled my idea of what love is, but I was also lucky. My grandmother was the complete opposite of my birth mother in every way that mattered. She saw the good in everyone she met and in every experience she had. She was open, accepting, and so full of love, it was like it spilled out of her. She would visit us often, and I would spend summers with her when I was young. When life became too much for me with my birth mother, I would live with her for stretches of time. What made me so incredibly lucky was having her steady example to counter the one I was learning at home. It’s so clear to me now that my life could have turned out very differently if I hadn’t been given that gift.

The contrast between my two moms was probably never so stark as when they learned, at different times, that I had a girlfriend.

My birth mom discovered my secret when I had just turned fifteen years old. I hadn’t meant for her to find out, but someone saw me kissing my then-girlfriend and told her about it. She came to find me immediately. My best

friend, my girlfriend, and I were all hanging out in the living room of my birth mom's house when she rushed in, grabbed me, and pulled me outside. I ended up on the ground in front of the house while she kicked me and called me names, screaming at me, "You're going to hell!" Afterward, I was bleeding so badly I probably should have gone to the hospital, but I didn't want to. Instead, my best friend stayed with me to ice my face. She had watched the whole thing from our living room window, and the experience was so upsetting for her that she was afraid to come out to her own family after that. She, too, was fifteen at the time, and she didn't tell them the truth until more than a decade later, when she was twenty-six years old.

Two years after that, when I was seventeen, I chose to tell my grandmother rather than let her discover it by accident like my birth mother had. My grandmother was born in the 1930s, and I'd always considered her to be pretty conservative because of the way she talked and the way she dressed. She'd also been a faithful churchgoer her entire life, so I was afraid she wouldn't like what I had to say. I didn't think she'd hurt me like my birth mother had—I knew her better than that—but I was afraid she might reject me, which would have been so much worse.

I was sweating I was so nervous, but my grandmother didn't even flinch when I told her. She just looked at me calmly and said, "Do you know how many accounts of homosexuality there are in the Bible?"

"No," I said, afraid of where this was going.

"There are six," she told me. "Do you know how many times the Bible talks about love?"

"No," I said again.

"Me neither," she replied. "It's in there so often that I lost count. It's safe to say that God's emphasis is on love and not on who you're dating."

## **CHOOSING LOVE**

You can imagine how much relief I felt from my grandmother's reaction. She went on to assure me that she would love anyone I loved and that person would always be welcome in her home. And that was it. There was no anger. No drama. Just a pure and simple expression of love.

Somewhere along the way I came to understand that it's our actions, more than our blood relationships, that matter most, and it's our actions that define who we are. My grandmother was the one who acted like a mother in my life, so to me she became my mom.

It was because of these two women that I learned to see love from both sides. From my mom (grandmother), I came to understand love as this infinite and powerful thing that could save people from dark and desperate circumstances. From my birth mother, I learned what a lack of love could do—how living without it could be so corrosive, so destructive.

While I was still living with my birth mother, I would often disappear into books as a way of coping with, or avoiding, the chaos at home. An interest in music drew me to books about Duke Ellington and Miles Davis, which in turn helped me discover a love of biographies. That's how I found Mother Teresa, whose words resonated with me when I was in the third grade, perhaps because I was looking for a way to make sense of my pain: "I have found the paradox, that if you love until it hurts, there can be no more hurt, only more love."<sup>2</sup>

When I became old enough to understand how different my grandmother was from everyone else I knew, I understood that she lived that quote every day. She taught me how to live it too. Her lessons were the reason I started feeding people when I was just fourteen years old. The first person I fed was someone I saw rifling through a trash can behind the restaurant where I worked. The restaurant had closed for the day, and I had the back door open as I was packing up food to be thrown away—perfectly good food, but that's how restaurants operate. I asked the man, "Hey, are you hungry?"

He didn't speak but he nodded at me, so I gave him some food, which he put in his grocery cart. I turned around to grab him a drink, but when I turned back he was already gone.

I was left wishing I could have done more to help. The interaction lasted hardly more than a moment, but it marked the beginning of something for me. After that, every time I saw a displaced person walk by the restaurant, I couldn't look away. I didn't have a lot to give as a teenager, but I would ask if he or she wanted some food. After a while my uncle, who owned the restaurant, found out and forbade me from doing it again. I didn't protest. I just started making food at home and giving that away instead.

One day a few years later, when I was still a teenager, I finally told my grandmother what I'd been doing. She was a faithful tither, giving every Sunday during church services, but I didn't feel like I was getting out of the church experience what she got out of it. So I told her I didn't want to tithe anymore; I wanted to feed people instead.

I'd been thinking about this for a while, but I hadn't told her because I was nervous about disappointing her. My grandmother was always very even-tempered. She never got angry, never raised her voice, but whenever

she shook her head at me in disappointment, it always gutted me. I shouldn't have worried in this case because she just looked at me with her typical grace and said: "That's alright. You don't have to give money to the church. That's not what tithing is about. It's about being mindful of others and giving to them what you can. You just have to do your part, whatever that is."

That was all the encouragement I needed. During the years that followed, no matter where I was or what I was doing, I would take time to feed people. I did it quietly, without telling anyone, for more than ten years. I found God in those spaces—not by going to church, but by being of service. In fact, feeding people felt like a religious experience from the very first time I did it. When the man who appeared behind my uncle's restaurant disappeared as quickly as he came, I was left standing there with a startling thought: *That was an angel*. I believed then and I believe now that he showed up in my life at that moment as a sign of what I was meant to do.

Like for many of us, when I first left home and was just starting out in the world, there was a difference between the work I did to make a living and the work I did to give my life purpose. I was a model and an actress, and then I started my own fashion brand, all the while finding time to feed people on the side. That changed in 2016 when I founded Lunch On Me, and my work and my purpose became one. LOM is a nonprofit dedicated to feeding organic, healthy food and offering holistic healing to those experiencing homelessness or hunger. We're based in Los Angeles, so most of our work takes place on or near Skid Row, but so far we've brought our particular brand of love, light, and community to New York, Detroit, Austin, Miami, and Hawaii. With just me, a few employees, and a list of over 900 volunteers, we've gone from serving 500 meals to 10,000 meals a month in less than two years.

Because we insist on as much fresh, organic food as possible, we can't get government funding. (It's too expensive according to government standards, but you'd be surprised how much public money goes toward packaged foods like chips and soda.) Instead, we rely on food donations from grocery stores, restaurants, catering companies, and other businesses. We take their donations and redistribute food that would otherwise go to waste in order to have a positive impact on the environment and the community. With no government help at all, we've gotten our costs down from five dollars per plate to just eighty-nine cents for a generous portion of healthy, organic food.

When people see us on the streets, offering plates of freshly made food to anyone who wants one, they often ask which church we're from. I tell them the truth: we're

not affiliated with any church. That confuses a lot of people—sometimes they're even suspicious—and they'll often ask, "Then why are you here?"

Answering that one can be a bit more difficult because we don't have a specific reason—not really. We're not there to save anyone's soul. We're not looking for credit or approval from others. In fact, we don't expect anything in return for what we do. Of course, we often get plenty back for our efforts, but that's not our primary purpose. We show up to serve simply for the sake of it. We believe the world could use more love, and we have love to give. So we give it, just because we can.

That's what it means to Love Without Reason. Over the years, serving people has become my religion, the street my church, and LWR the organizing principle in my life. It's also our rallying call to encourage others to join us.

Not surprisingly, LWR grew out of my grandmother's example. She would do anything to help anybody she could, and she never expected anything in return. She had no debts with anyone because she was *happy* to be of service. She loved to do it. It's who she was. Deep down, I think it's who a lot of us want to be.

There was no reason for my grandmother to give so gladly other than because she believed that's what a person should do. I watched her my whole life, and I came to understand that she was right. It *is* how we should be. The world was better for my grandmother's gifts. The people around her felt valued and cared for. But just as importantly, her own life was full, meaningful, and purposeful up until the day she died. Serving people—or what I call "giving a f♥ck"—was her way of showing love, but also her way of bringing more love into her life. And what I see out there, whether I'm working on Skid Row or speaking in Beverly Hills, is that so many of us are longing for just what she had.

So why do I give a f♥ck? Because I don't have a choice. It's like asking why we love. We love because it's who we are. It's in our nature. It's what our souls long to do. So why not give our souls more of what they want?

#### LOVE WITHOUT REASON: A DEFINITION

Being intentional about the act of love, not the outcome. It's love for love's sake and nothing else.

### **SO WHAT'S THIS BOOK ABOUT, ANYWAY?**

When I tell you that I've met so many people out there longing for the kind of love that my grandmother embodied, I'm not just talking about the people

I meet on Skid Row or in other underserved communities throughout the country. I'm talking about the hundreds and hundreds of people who show up to volunteer for LOM and the tens of thousands more who follow us on social media. I'm talking about the thousands of people I speak to at wellness conferences and community events each year who are searching for something more. I'm talking about all the nonprofit workers, social workers, teachers, parents, and others I've met who help people through what they do but who don't always feel satisfied or sustained by it. And I'm talking about you.

What I see over and over again is that so many people out there, no matter what their level of privilege, wish that the world were a better place. They want

### WHY I GIVE A F♥CK . . .

"I feel like we can do better together than we can separated and apart. I feel like there's unity in love, and if everybody could just tap into the good in them, we could all be like Power Rangers. I'm not messing around when I say that. If we all tapped into our inner powers and came together, we could do so much more to make this world better. This world is ours, and if we could just do that, can you imagine how amazing the world could be?"

**JAMILA**  
*nurse, age 32*

even provide us with the inspiration to learn them ourselves. What we need is a way to bear witness to all the many things that have gone wrong in the world, and then—instead of shutting down or turning away because it all feels like too much—empower ourselves to give a f♥ck.

So that's what this book is: a course on "Giving a F♥ck 101." A blueprint that will show, step by step, how we can each build a better world around us—what we can do, how we can do it, and how we can strengthen our hearts so we're up to the challenge. Our giving instinct is like a muscle. If we don't use it, we will

there to be less fighting and less hate. They wish they didn't have to witness so much suffering. They want to make a difference, and they want that difference to matter. They want all of this, but they don't know how to have it. They want all of this, but they don't even know if it's possible. Many of them already believe that it isn't, so they don't even try.

But what if it *is* possible? What if it's possible to feel a little better about the world and our place in it? Almost everyone I've ever talked to about this, almost everyone I've ever met, will say, "Yes, I want that!" The question is *how*?

I don't know where you went to high school, but where I went there wasn't a course on "Making a Difference in the World" or "How to Do Your Part." The world isn't typically organized to teach us these skills or



lose it—and for some of us, it may already be weakened from disuse. But if we exercise it regularly, we can make it strong and resilient again. Let's not forget that our hearts are muscles too, and they're looking to us to make good use of them. And because the heart is a muscle that gets stronger with practice, I've included what I call "heartwork" exercises throughout the book to help you build its strength and capacity.

And even beyond the how, we'll talk about the why—why we need to learn this, for our own sake as well as each other's. It's not our fault the world is the way it is, but we are suffering because of it. And wouldn't we all like to suffer a little less? Don't we all wonder sometimes if there isn't more to life than this? We have to wonder what it's costing us to turn our backs on the possibility that things could be better. We have to wonder what it's doing to us—to our happiness, to our hearts, to our sense of power and agency, to our sense of self—to deny the natural giving and loving parts of ourselves because it just feels too hard or too painful to use them freely in this mixed-up world.

"I found the paradox, that if you love until it hurts, there can be no more hurt, only more love"—that's what Mother Teresa said, and I believe it. It's also the mission of this book: to help us all open up our experience of love so that we are able to give more of it, in more places, to more people, for more reasons—or even for no reason at all. Because imagine what the world would be like, imagine what *we* would be like, if we could only do that for ourselves and for each other. Wouldn't that be something to see?

Besides, there's a natural high that comes from giving and loving, and who doesn't want to feel better? And besides that besides, why not just try Loving Without Reason? What do you have to lose anyway?

# 1

## HOW GIVING A F♥CK CAN CHANGE YOUR LIFE

*“When we love, we always strive to become better than we are. When we strive to become better than we are, everything around us becomes better too.”*

PAULO COELHO, *The Alchemist*<sup>1</sup>

**R**aise your hand if you think the world as it exists right now is just plain great. You wouldn't change a thing. Practically perfect in every way that you can think of.

Not raising your hand? I didn't think so. Me neither.

Pick a problem, any problem—poverty, disease, inequality, violence, the climate crisis, political crisis, economic crisis, housing crisis. Pick any one of them, or even all of them at once, and ask yourself: How did the world get this way?

Yeah, I don't know either. But I'll tell you one thing that I do know for sure: the world didn't get this way because we all cared too much.

I believe that we have a “giving a f♥ck” problem in our culture. I first noticed it in my twenties when I started volunteering at different nonprofits around Skid Row, an area of downtown Los Angeles that's home to one of the nation's largest concentrations of people living on the streets. It was an eye-opening experience, and not for the reasons you might expect.

I had chosen the work because I wanted to connect with people, learn their stories, and build relationships so I could be of better service. I think the same intention drove most of us working there, at least in the beginning. But the reality of the work was something very different.

One of the foundations where I volunteered occupied seven floors in the heart of Skid Row, only one of which was dedicated as a shelter for the

displaced. The rest of the floors were offices or empty space, which could have been used to expand the foundation's programs but wasn't for reasons that were never explained. Then there was the director, who drove a Tesla and wore expensive suits when he showed up to work—on Skid Row. He would attend the organization's fancy fundraisers but never interacted with the people we served. The worst part was that no matter how much money the foundation had—and it had a lot for a nonprofit—workers were constantly being asked to find new ways to cut corners, not in administrative costs, but in the services offered to the people we were meant to be helping.

One day, the director decided to save money by canceling a graduation ceremony for a group completing a drug rehab program. The organization had just secured yet another multimillion-dollar grant, so they could afford the relatively small cost of the celebration, but the director still considered it an unnecessary expense. Now, getting sober is hard. Getting sober while you're living on the streets is practically heroic, so I couldn't believe he'd outright cancel something the graduates had worked so hard for. Some of them, in their entire lives, had never had even a birthday party thrown in their honor, so this celebration was a big deal. It was something they'd been looking forward to, and here we were going to take it away from them at a pivotal moment when they were trying to make big changes in their lives.

It just felt wrong, so I decided to throw the party myself. I bought food for about fifty people and cooked it in my kitchen at home. I made the kinds of things I would make for friends and family if they were coming over for a special dinner—shrimp pasta, salmon with garlic, herbed rice, and fresh green salad. It didn't even cost that much, but the reaction was something I'll never forget.

I didn't know at the time that people on Skid Row don't get a lot of fresh food. Practically every person who came to get a plate said something about how grateful they were to have a real, home-cooked meal. Pretty soon a few approached hesitantly to ask for more. When I said, "Yes, of course," it started a wave, and everyone was asking for seconds, then thirds. I just stood there serving plate after plate, swallowing back tears. It was the first time I'd cooked for so many people, and I'd been stressing about it the entire time I was preparing the food. At the same time, it had felt like such a small gesture considering what these graduates had accomplished. But all that receded in the face of what I was witnessing: person after person finding such joy in my simple gesture and reflecting that joy back to me by offering their heartfelt thanks for what I'd given them.

Not long after, I decided I could do a better job on my own of fostering that kind of joy. I stopped volunteering for other organizations and started Lunch On Me. I'd never run a nonprofit before, so I never could have imagined we'd grow so fast or get so much attention for our work. I attribute it to the fact that I tapped into a need almost by accident.

Here's the thing: I'm not talking about the needs of people on Skid Row or the other displaced people we serve. That's the kind of need I've long understood. It was the needs of our volunteers, partners, sponsors, and champions that, as time went on, really surprised me.

On the day of the graduation ceremony, my focus was on the graduates and on celebrating their accomplishments, but since then I've given more thought to the people who worked alongside me at the nonprofit. They surely didn't go into this kind of work for the money. After all, many of us were volunteers, and the professionals among us didn't get paid well enough to be attracted by dollar signs. They had to be drawn to the work because they wanted to help people and make a difference. You can imagine, then, what it must have felt like to be in a position where you could really impact someone, where you could make their day by just throwing a modest party, and then be told that it wasn't worth the trouble. Working at that nonprofit taught me a valuable lesson, which is that putting our hands in our pockets when we know we could be reaching out to someone, doing little to nothing when we know we could be doing something good and purposeful, that holding ourselves back in this way makes a person feel like crap.

Unfortunately, I was the only one that day who openly questioned whether canceling the party was the right thing to do. Even after I took responsibility for it, no one offered to help me. I don't think it was because they were bad people. I think they had just grown accustomed to a culture that doesn't prioritize things like serving and caring over profits, even in the world of nonprofits, where helping people is supposed to be the main purpose. I think this is a common problem among people in "helping" professions. Most people choose to become something like a nurse, social worker, or nonprofit worker because they want to make a difference in people's lives, but the structures in place don't always support that intention. Instead, people learn to deny the part of themselves that longed to really serve people. In the case of the organization I was working with, it was like everyone there had gone numb.

In contrast, at Lunch On Me we rely on the help of a revolving roster of volunteers for all our services and events, and the sense of satisfaction that I see regularly on their faces is like day to my former coworkers' night. Our

volunteers aren't getting paid and most of them have careers in completely separate fields, but they come anyway. And they keep coming back. I believe it's

#### WHY I GIVE A F♥CK . . .

"My mom was a single mom and I was the oldest sibling, so I've always been one to help. I think because of that, I learned that helping people is not a chore. I've worked at jobs where I didn't feel like I was helping and I was miserable. The kind of work that has always made me happy is when I'm doing something for other people. For me, helping is not a problem. It makes my life better."

#### SHAIANNE

*makeup artist and designer, age 26*

a f♥ck. They want to be conduits for giving, sharing, helping, caring—for love—and when they get a chance, the effect can be pretty profound.

because we don't ask them to sit in cubicles and stuff envelopes. We don't ask them to stand on a street corner with a clipboard asking for money. We ask them to connect with someone in need and offer whatever they can to help—whether it's a plate of food, some company, a compliment, a sympathetic ear, a hug, or all of the above and more. And when they do something that causes a smile to dawn on someone's face, it's reflected on their own. Giving and spreading love is contagious, and that's what makes them so *happy* to volunteer.

I see it every day: there are so many people out there longing for an opportunity to do good, to make a difference, to connect with people, and to be of service if only for an hour or two. There are so many people out there longing for an opportunity to give

## THE LONELY, NARCISSISTIC, DEPRESSED, AND ANXIOUS WORLD WE LIVE IN

One of the biggest barriers to giving a f♥ck is that our culture is set up to reinforce our separateness rather than our connectedness or coming together. Even if we don't mean to, it's far too easy to end up living in our own bubbles. In the 2016 presidential election, for example, polling by *The Washington Post* showed that large groups of Hillary Clinton voters didn't know anyone voting for Donald Trump, and vice versa.<sup>2</sup> And that's just politics. Despite the ideal of America as a melting pot, the neighborhoods where we live and spend most of our time are not all that diverse.

We often think of diversity in terms of race. While it's true that most American neighborhoods lack that kind of diversity, even the ones that have it tend to be sorted in other ways. Most of us live and interact with people