CLAIRE DIAZ-ORTIZ

THE BETTER LIFE CHALLENGE

Thanks for downloading *The Better Life Challenge*. These ten challenges are brought to you from the new book by Claire Diaz-Ortiz, *The Better Life*, and from the Moody Collective team. As you work through these ten challenges, we encourage you to examine your life and find small ways to improve it each day, starting here. Find more than twenty other life hacks, challenges, and stories from Claire in her full book, *The Better Life*.

Challenge 1:

SET YOUR INTENTIONS

Like most of us, I want to be happier. Whether it's waking up with more spark or going to bed more satisfied with my day, I want to open my life to the opportunity for greater joy.

As such, I love to read books about happiness. My writer pal Gretchen Rubin has written a few of those, and in one of them she recommends a small, powerful idea that has taken hold to become a big, strong force in my own life.

That idea is to choose a word each and every year that represents the year you have in front of you. Rather, to choose a word *for* your year. (Oh, and take a cue from Gretchen: years don't need to start in January.) Choose one single word that imbues the type of year you wish to have, one word that can serve as a guidepost for what you want in the season to come. A singular word you can always harken

back to in moments of darkness and doubt. One word that informs your decisions, crystalizes your passions and priorities, and embodies you—the new you!—in the months ahead.

Depending on the type of year you seek, there are many words that can do the trick. Words like Move, Pause, Breathe, Dance, Less, Family, Health, Travel, and Choose all hold a certain special sauce.

The guidelines are simple. The word can be a verb or a noun. It can be a long word or a short word. But it is key that the word brings together everything you fervently hope to live and breathe in the year to come. One word to inform and synthesize the year you have ahead of you. One word to mean everything you want the year to be, and one word that will help serve as a guiding light when times get tough and you're not clear on where your priorities are.

A few years ago, my word of the year was Rest.

It was a word that meant the world to me in that season of my life. I was harried and overwhelmed from a few too many years of corporate globetrotting, and I needed a daily reminder to do less. And so I did. Although my Rest might not have been as restful as the Rest that some might be able to enjoy (I saw nary a beach that entire year), my word still served as a key force in getting me to slow down. It helped

me to make decisions, and to keep in mind what was really important when difficult choices arose.

Should I go to that social event—or stay home? Should I say yes to what could be a great opportunity, or pass it up to wait for something better to come along? Should I travel to that work meeting—or call into it instead?

When life and work calls for us to be busy, it is hard to slow down. However, by attempting to make this word forefront in my mind, I sought to make small strides that would lead to notable changes and positive transformation. I knew I wouldn't be perfect. I knew I would never get it 100 percent. But I did know that by setting the intention, I could make some progress.

In the end, I did. And you can, too. Set a word now, and watch your year rise up to take shape around it.

Challenge 2:

TRY THE PRESENT PRINCIPLE

No matter what time you get up, having a morning routine will help ground your day. Most days, I start my mornings with a seven-step process I have come to call the Present Principle. It's a simple routine built around the simple acronym P.R.E.S.E.N.T., which reminds me to implement the seven most important things I need to do daily to keep me present—and to do those things in the mornings.

My routine won't work for everyone, but I hope it will give you the inspiration you need to come up with a morning routine of your own that will lead you to success. As you'll see as you read through mine, the key to developing a routine of your own is to identify the handful of important activities you want to accomplish each and every day, and then to front-load them into your morning.

The 7 Steps in My Morning Routine (the Present Principle):

P—PRAY (or PAUSE)

I start my days with a steaming cup of bulletproof coffee or tea and a prayer of guidance, thanks, and direction for my day ahead. Another way to think of this moment more broadly is as a "pause"—for prayer and contemplation. It's a critical way to start a busy life, day in and day out.

R—READ

After praying and pausing, I dive into reading something inspirational and motivational. I generally work through one particular devotional for a few months, and sometimes have a few going at a time. Make sure to find one that speaks to you personally, and not one that someone else loves but you think reads like fluff (been there, done that). If you aren't into the idea of inspirational or spiritual reading at this groggy hour, think about a good read on business, leadership, or productivity that you can slowly work through sections of, day in and day out.

E—EXPRESS

After reading, I then take my own thoughts to paper. I use a black Moleskine journal that has seen better days, but a Post-it note or Evernote document will do just fine. The key is just to get your feelings out there. Worries, thoughts, thanks, angst; anything and everything.

S—SCHEDULE

Now's the time in my routine that I sketch out an overview of my day and do a check-in on my week. I typically spend five minutes on this step—drafting my day's schedule and checking in on the week at large. I do this on paper, with the goal of this step being offline, but you may find it works best to use your computer or an app.

E—EXERCISE

I try to get in exercise of some sort every day (I run most days, except when my jogging stroller gets the best of me), and I find that doing it in the morning is the most effective way to keep at it. Experts say this is also smartest when working to form solid habits. Move daily, and you'll feel better.

N—NOURISH

Each day, do one thing that truly nourishes you. Go on a walk. Take a bubble bath. Read a novel. Talk to someone you love. Do something for you. It's fun to do this in the morning straightaway, but if not, put this off until later as a reward for getting your big tasks of the day done.

T—TRACK

At the day's end, look back at how many of the steps in your routine you were able to accomplish. Can you do better tomorrow? Track your progress, and think about what is working and what isn't. This will better poise you to make tweaks and win long-term.

I'm not always perfect. Some days I don't do every step, and some days I don't do any of them at all, but trying to implement this routine each and every day has been an incredible motivation for me and has given me the conviction that morning routines can make anyone's day better and brighter.

Now you try it.

Challenge 3:

SAY NO

The year I decided to create a word of the year was the year I also tried to learn how to better say no. It made sense, of course. My word of the year was Rest, and as I learned almost immediately, the only way to rest more was to limit the things you say yes to.

When I had a choice between X and Y, I remembered my word. When I needed to make a decision between going out or staying home, I remembered my word. When I wanted to drink another double shot espresso and fire off a string of emails to world changers about things we should do together, I *remembered my word.* And this meant I had to say no on many occasions when my normally overactive brain and body simply wanted to shout YES!

Saying NO, as everyone knows, is hard. And so I had to work to get better at it.

One day, to practice my NO muscle, I tried to come up with ninety-nine ways to best say it. Ninety-nine ways that

kindly, smartly, officially ended the ask in question in favor of me having more time to say yes to something better.

My aim was that each word or phrase should be truthful, firm, and not apologetic or explanatory. Sometimes I succeeded and sometimes I failed. But I did finish that list. And this is what it looked like.

Ninety-Nine Ways to Say No

1. Not now.
2. Look! Squirrel! (This wasn't my idea, but I loved it. And I will be forever grateful to the blog reader who sent in this gem.)
3. My word of the year is Rest, so I can't fit another thing in.
4. Nope.
5. No thanks, I won't be able to make it.
6. Not this time.
7. Heck no.
8. No way, José! (Since my husband is named José, this is a favorite.)
9. Regrettably, I'm not able to.
10. It's that time of the year when I must say no.
11. It's a Wednesday. I have a "No on Wednesday" policy.

12. Ask me in a year.
13. I know someone else who might be a fit for that.
14. You're so kind to think of me, but I can't.
15. Maybe another time.
16. Sounds great, but I can't commit.
17. Rats! Would have loved to.
18. I'm slammed.
19. Perhaps next season when things clear up.
20. I'm at the end of my rope right now so I have to take a rain check.
21. If only it worked ;)
22. I'll need to bow out.
23. I'm going to have to exert my No muscle on this one.
24. I'm taking some time.
25. Thanks for thinking of me, but I can't.
26. I'm in a season of No.
27. I'm not the person for you on this one.
28. I'm learning to limit my commitments.
29. I'm not taking on new things.
30. Another time might work.
31. It doesn't sound like the right fit, but many thanks.
32. I'm resting right now.
33. I'm not sure I'm the best person for it.

34. No thank you, but it sounds lovely.
35. It sounds like you're looking for something I'm not able to give right now.
36. I believe I wouldn't fit the bill, sorry.
37. It's not a good idea for me.
38. Not now.
39. I'm trying to cut back.
40. I won't be able to help.
41. If only I had a clone!
42. I'm not able to set aside the time needed.
43. I won't be able to dedicate the time I need to it.
44. I'm head-down right now on a project, so I won't be able to.
45. I wish there were two of me!
46. I'm honored, but can't.
47. NoNoNoNoNoNo.
48. I'm booked into something else.
49. I'm not able to make it.
50. Thanks, but no thanks.
51. I'm not able to make it this week/month/year.
52. Bye now.
53. I've got too much on my plate right now.
54. I'm not taking on anything else.

55. Bandwidth is low, so I won't be able to make it work.
56. I wish I could make it work.
57. Not possible.
58. I wish I were able to.
59. If only I could!
60. I'd love to—but can't.
61. Darn! Not able to fit it in.
62. Nah.
63. No thanks, I have another commitment.
64. It's just not a good time.
65. Sadly I have something else.
66. Unfortunately not.
67. Something else will be taking up my time. Sorry.
68. Apologies, but I can't make it.
69. Thank you so much for asking. Can you keep me on your list for next year?
70. I'm flattered you considered me, but unfortunately I'll have to pass this time.
71. Unfortunately it's just not a match.
72. No, sorry, that's not really my thing.
73. Nope. Again.
74. Eeek! (no.)

75. No, I'd rather not, but thanks anyway.
76. I can't make it work.
77. It just won't fit right now.
78. I'm really buckling down on my priorities right now, so I can't.
79. No says I.
80. My family won't allow me to take this one on.
81. This isn't a good season.
82. Ick.
83. Nein.
84. Sorry, no can do.
85. I only say yes to very select opportunities, and unfortunately this doesn't meet my criteria.
86. The demands would be too much for me.
87. It's not feasible for me to take this on.
88. I wish I had all the time in the world.
89. My body double can.
90. In another life.
91. I cry, but decline.
92. My advisors won't agree to it.
93. My body says yes, but my heart says no.
94. I'm not the person you're looking for.
95. I don't have an iota of bandwidth left in my wee brain.

96. Somewhere over the rainbow.
97. If only.
98. N to the O.
99. NO.

Can you think of other ways to say no that aren't on this list? Over the next few days, try to find something you can say no to in order to leave more room in your life for other things.

Challenge 4:

FIND THE PEACE AROUND YOU

Most of the time, we don't see the peace around us. Instead, we bury our heads in work and play and family and sometimes—only *sometimes*—do we raise our heads up out of the sand to see the calm that the world really does offer. We may know that living in the present is key to health and happiness, but it's hard to remember that in the midst of our eternal days of moving parts and stressful overwhelm.

But we can try.

Every day, I work hard to remember there are a few things I can do to try to find more peace.

Here are a few of those things:

First Thing in the Morning, Do Nothing

As I've said, I love me a good morning routine, and one of the key steps of my morning routine is a moment of prayer

and meditation. A couple of years ago, though, I read that doing nothing—nothing at all—could also be wildly effective. So I started trying it. Nothing. And it turns out that it's one of the hardest things you could ever do. But I try. I look at the wall, I drink my tea, and I let the thoughts flow in. And I find the kind of peace and silence you achieve when doing nothing—nothing at all—is a powerful addition to a practice of prayer and meditation.

Take Mini Breaks Throughout the Day to Breathe

I once read an article in an airplane magazine that suggested you should take a mini-sabbatical. *Great idea!* I thought. *I love it!* And then it gave, as an example, the suggestion that you should put your phone on airplane mode while driving to work. And so I put down the magazine in frustration. Because if that is a mini-sabbatical then I am a ballerina. (I am not a ballerina.)

But although it's not a mini-sabbatical, it is worth doing. In general, taking mini-breaks in our daily lives is a great way to try and keep our stress and overwhelm at bay. So go ahead, pull your hands away from the keyboard, move your eyes to the horizon, and breathe. Let the thoughts come in and let the thoughts flow out. And breathe slowly all the while. I've heard it said that making sure your feet are on the floor at key

moments of grounding can also help you feel more connected to what's going on around you. So try that as you breathe.

Find a Moment of Stop in Your Day

Mini breathing breaks are great, but what's even better is a ten or fifteen minute period of time where you can go full stop and do nothing, all for yourself. I find that the best way to do this—especially in a corporate environment where it's not necessarily possible to stare at the wall for fifteen minutes while others look on in wonder—is to take a short break to go on a walk. *Outside*. Combine it with a trip to get a coffee, say, or to run an errand you need to do. But in those ten minutes of walking, don't make phone calls. Don't listen to podcasts. Just walk and breathe and wait as the thoughts jamming your mind slowly rearrange themselves into calm.

These tips aren't revolutionary, and they also aren't incredibly different from one another. They follow a key theme of taking time out—in smaller and smaller doses. But they are powerful. Because they are all about finding moments to disconnect from the speeding train of your life to bring your mind and heart back to calm.

Challenge 5:

STOP BEATING YOURSELF UP

When I first began to talk about Bob Goff and Quit Thursdays on my blog, something strange started happening. Again and again, I started to hear from folks who said the number one thing they wanted to quit doing was to quit beating themselves up. So, instead of folks saying they wanted to quit *doing* a particular thing, I heard that folks wanted to quit *beating themselves up* for doing that particular thing

The list of things people beat themselves up for is nearly endless. Because, it turns out, we're really hard on ourselves. At any moment of any day, many of us can be found beating ourselves up for a host of things.

For biting our nails.

For waking up late.

For getting upset with a screaming five-month-old.
For wishing we hadn't bought that dog.
For watching *Top Chef* for three hours.
For being happy that our kids are grown and out of the house.
For being happy when we don't have to babysit our (wonderful) grandchild every day of the week.
For being happy when our boss is out of town (and the pressure is off).
For not having as many children as we'd like.
For not wanting more children.
For screaming at our husband that one time.
For being rude to the customer service representative.
For not standing up to the customer service representative.
For not standing up for ourselves in general.
For being annoyed at our mother-in-law.
For being annoyed at our sister.
For being annoyed at our children.
For being annoyed at our husbands.
For not reading as much as we'd like.
For not sleeping as much as we'd like.
For not exercising as much as we'd like.
For not eating as well as we'd like.

For generally not being half as awesome a person as we'd like to be.

For generally not doing absolutely every little thing and taking on every opportunity that ever comes our way.

For not working enough.

For not spending enough time at home.

For, well, everything.

We can all acknowledge that there are things we all do that we'd be better off getting rid of—things that take up space in our lives that aren't helping us be our best selves. One of those things, though, is the way we make ourselves feel bad about the not-great choices we make. I'm all for making better decisions and living better lives. But there is motivation, and there is self-flagellation. I'm in favor of the former.

Quit Thursday is perfectly primed to help you stop beating yourself up. And if Bob were here, he would tell you: Whatever it is you are beating yourself up for, quit it. Put down the guilt and step away from the problem.

Do it on Quit Thursday, or on any day of the week. What can you quit beating yourself up about?

For more on Bob Goff's Quit Thursdays, read pages 73-75 in the full version of *The Better Life*.

Challenge 6:

GIVE THANKS

I met Ann Voskamp on the Interwebs. And when I read her bestselling book, a startlingly beautiful look into the grace of thanks, I was speechless. Speechless at the power of *One Thousand Gifts*—a book of words so well woven that it couldn't help but speak to my heart from the very first page. Speechless at her sweet life—a farm, six kids, a husband who works the land. And speechless at her big idea—that thanking God for the things we have and see and hold each and every day is the key to it all.

And so, inspired by Ann, I began a long journey of trying to give more thanks. She wasn't the first person who had ever told me to keep a gratitude journal, or to give thanks each day, or to start my morning prayers with a note of thanks. But her words affected me in a way that others had not, and it was with her inspiration that I began putting one foot in front of the other, trying to give thanks more regularly than I ever had before.

I have learned things along the way.

I have learned that taking things for granted is the easiest thing to do. We know this of course, and we hear it again and again, and some of us have it beaten into our brains from church sermons, or inspirational books we buy in airports, or wise friends. But we still cannot remember it, and every time we step off a peak into one of life's lesser valleys, we find ourselves missing the good times, and realizing that we never knew how easy we had it, and how lacking in gratitude we really were.

I have learned that the best things in my life are the things I am most likely to take for granted. It is the big things—a loving husband, a healthy baby girl, a roof in the winter—that are the easiest to never remember. And even when I make myself name them each day—José, Lucia, our home—I realize the last thing I am doing is doing them justice. Because the repetitive wonder of it all—whether in my life or in my journal—blinds me to the joy.

And so our challenge is to find a way to not shield ourselves from the joy and the grace of our very best things. And this is hard, and I do not know the way.

And so every day, I try. I try to give thanks in the things I know I can do.

I can smile wide. I can spot a bird. I can blink my eyes.

I can take a sip of water. I can sign my name. I can bite into a cupcake. I can wave to a friend. I can look at the sun. I can breathe in deep. I can spot a star. I can turn a page. I can pick up a baby. I can catch a snowflake. I can clip a flower. I can blow a kiss. I can hug a friend. I can lick an ice cream cone. And I can give thanks along the way.

These are the things I can do to thank God for this life.

Challenge yourself to think this way. What can you be thankful for? Practice naming those things.

Challenge 7:

READ MORE

As a child, I *loved* to read.

In grade school, it was a relatively good thing. As I plowed through books like it was my job, my parents heard about how "advanced" of a reader I was. *She reads at an 8th grade level! She reads at a 10th grade level! She reads like a college student!*

In high school, the busiest time of my life until that point so far, reading took more of a back seat than I wanted. I slept little, did homework all the time, ran ragged at sports practices, and on the rare occasion that I had a free moment I spent it obsessing over college. But on vacations things were different. On vacations we'd go away for a week and I'd tear through ten books. *This is what I was meant to be doing, I'd sigh.* And then I'd be back in real life, where we read a mere ten pages a week in the cruddy English class at my cruddy high school.

In college, I had more free time than in high school

(something about not having to be in class for eight hours a day helped that), and reading for pleasure and personal knowledge came back into my life. A bit.

In the years after college, though, my world opened again, like it had when I was as a child. Suddenly, I had so many more hours in which I could read. Sure there was work, and family and friends and all the regular sorts of life commitments we sign up for by the sheer nature of becoming adults, but—more or less—I owned my time more than I did in the past.

And it was in this era that I realized that not everyone read like I did. Worse than that, I realized that most people thought it was weird the lengths to which I'd go to read anywhere and everywhere.

When I spent the year traveling around the world with Lara, she once did a hysterical photographic series of pictures of me reading in places where I should have clearly been absorbing the view. It was as if, in my adult years, I became incapable of going anywhere without a book.

Which is exactly what it was, in fact. These days, no matter where I go, I have a book in hand, and it baffles me the number of people I see who don't do the same. How many lines do I stand in where the vast majority of people around me are simply staring off into space? Decompressing is good,

and taking a moment to zone out may be a positive thing, but can this really be our norm? All the time? For most people?

One early morning as I was passing through immigration in some port in the United States, this all came to a head.

It was five in the morning, or thereabouts, and the line was horrid. We'd been waiting easily for forty minutes at this point, and I'd been reading the whole time. Most of my fellow passengers were not doing the same, and those who weren't trying to soothe wriggling babies or talking with their traveling companions just stared off into space.

At one point, two men traveling together looked at me, momentarily stunned, and said: "You're reading? At five in the morning? How can you do that?"

I responded, just as baffled, "How can you not?"

We stared at one another awkwardly and then decided to part ways, the distance between our two perspectives too great to overcome. I'm a reader, you see. And that was the only way to explain it.

In reality, I think most people are readers at heart.

Tons of studies tell us why reading makes us smarter and more informed. Many thought leaders claim that reading is a key predictor of success in business and in life.

If you already love reading, you are lucky. Lucky in that challenging yourself to read more will simply include finding

more time in your life to do so. If you don't already love reading, however, you need to start there.

Either way, start small.

If you want to find more time in your life for the reading you already love, add ten minutes of reading a day on your lunch break or when you wake in the morning or right before you get on the elliptical or when you're—yes—waiting in line at customs. Finding these moments and learning that these moments exist all around you will help you realize you have the power to create more.

If your challenge is finding a passion for reading (for the first time, or once again), start small there as well. Find a short book with a message that you can't wait to learn about. Don't go for meaty nonfiction, but rather something light, fun, and guaranteed to entice you. Short stories? A mystery? Find something that lights any spark of interest. Over time, you can build your reading muscle to start branching out into other genres.

Read more, so you can read more.

Your life will thank you.

Challenge 8:

WRITE NOW

My father is a writer—a journalist, a book writer, a lover of words. A man who never wanted his daughter to do the same. While I was growing up, he always said he would like to cut off my hands so I wouldn't follow suit. He never did it, and this here book is (one) result.

Writing, for writers, is often more of a curse than a blessing. A need that must be filled. A longing that must be met. Something—simply—that must be done.

When I don't write, I yearn for it.

I idealize it in a way I cannot explain. I think of isolated cabins and remote lakes and me, a pen in hand, writing my way to the next great something.

This is not reality. Reality is forcing myself to sit down and type.

Reality is me booking an eleven-day solo cruise without my fiancé to write the first draft of a book. Reality is missing my business school graduation because I sit, two blocks

away, completing my final edits before sending a manuscript to a publisher. Reality is scheduling a weekend at a hotel away from my husband and new, small baby in order to get words onto paper. Reality is going to an Internet-less café and drinking six decaf lattes in the span of one ten-hour day to edit a manuscript. But the harsh reality of writing (Cruise ships! Hotels! Lattes!) doesn't take away from the joy that writing—the writing once it's written, perhaps—does give me.

Because, writing, at its heart, gives me two great gifts.

First, it gives me the chance to create something. By typing away, I can create a thing that I know I made.

Second, it is expression at its finest. By putting pen to page I pour out the creative me.

Both are gifts for different sides of me.

Writing means different things to different people. For people who define themselves as writers, writing is often more about the creation. Non-writers, people who do not in some way define themselves this way, see different things from beginning a writing practice. It's more therapeutic, perhaps, more grounded in expression than in creation.

Both are essential. And I believe that both can do immensely positive things in your own life. Starting a writing practice—even a simple daily practice of three minutes of

jotting down what you think on a legal pad—can have enormous benefits for your health and your state of mind. It can help you understand what you really feel, make decisions in times of trial, and better push for what you really want.

There is no better advice than to write, and write now.

Challenge 9:

TRACK YOUR DAYS

The concept of evaluating your days is not new. I've talked about doing it during my morning routine, and many productivity gurus tout its wisdom. It works because it makes sense.

If we don't have a goal, we'll never get where we want to go. And if we don't stop and evaluate where we are, we'll never know if we're there.

In the spirit of small life hacks that make a big difference, I can't stress enough the importance of looking back and asking:

What was the best thing I did today?

You might be intrigued, and surprised, by some of the answers. Yes, it might be the obvious: "When I ate chocolate ice cream," or "When I watched the game."

But it might also be something more unexpected. "*When I read for five minutes in the waiting room,*" or "*When I was*

running and it started raining," or *"When I played with my daughter when she woke up at three a.m."* Whatever it is, this question aims to help you figure out if you can do more of that thing in order to make every day better.

Now, I don't stop there, and I typically go further to ask another question:

What was the best thing I did last week?

And,

What was the best thing I did last month?

If you ask yourself these simple questions, you're bound to find out some unexpected and illuminating things about yourself and the ways you spend your time. Most important, you'll see some guideposts to how you should be better spending your time in the future. I'm a fan for doing this with great regularity, and what I find most amazing about this practice is that it isn't hard or scientific, but it is immediately rewarding. By simply looking at a week's worth of days tracked, I can see what it is that I like doing most, and what I should be doing more of. By expanding that—and looking at a whole month's worth—I learn even more. How am I really spending my days and how do I want to be spending them better?

Simple tracking can lead to simple changes.

Challenge 10:

DO THE THING THAT YOU CAN DO

My grandmother, Ma, can't go to church anymore. She's doing pretty well, don't get me wrong. She's ninety-two, and still lives alone, and still drives short distances to get her groceries, and is sharp as a tack. But walking long distances is harder, and the church hasn't figured out their parking very well, and the weather is often a mess where she lives, and the eighty-six-year-old man, who was secretly in love with her and who always waited for her in the pew they shared, died last year.

So church is out.

But she's okay with this. She went to church her whole life, and she understands that church, like her bridge group or her shoulder mobility, wasn't meant to last forever. But

what she learned at church *was*. At least that's the way she says it.

Instead of going to church, Ma bakes cakes.

Not a lot and not too often. After all, it doesn't make much sense to make a big old cake when you live alone. But sometimes she does.

One day last fall she got out all the ingredients. It took a while, of course. She pulled out the stool to reach the top shelf in her spotless kitchen. And then, again and again, she got up on the stool, held on to the cupboard with one hand, and with the other pulled down what she needed to make the apple cake. And when it was done, after she'd put the final touches of powdered sugar all over the top, she sighed.

And then she began cutting. Because, of course, there's no way she could eat the whole cake. It would be hard for her to eat an entire piece, if we're being honest. So first she cut a big hunk and gave it to the Russian woman next door. And then she gave another hunk to the caretaker of the man who lives below her. And then she called up her other downstairs neighbor, the squirrely one, the ex-teacher who is in her seventies but sometimes looks decades older.

And Ma said to her over the phone, "I'd like to bring you some cake." But this neighbor wasn't so sure.

"Well, what's in it?" she asked, skeptically.

And Ma explained. It has apple and flour and lots of sugar and some vanilla and some cinnamon and some nutmeg and some powdered sugar, and the list went on. The neighbor agreed, begrudgingly, and so Ma wrapped up the piece of cake and carried it down to her.

And then Ma came home, closed the door, and sat down to eat her own piece. She'd spent all day baking, had given away all but this one piece, and was now ready to enjoy it.

And then the phone rang again. It was the neighbor, that squirrely one, the one who never seems to have enough visitors and always seems to be anxious about something. The one who wasn't so sure about that cake.

"Can you bring me more of that cake?" she asked abruptly. No greeting. No thanks.

Ma looked at her last piece, the piece she hadn't yet cut into, and she shook her head. And she took it downstairs. Because she can't go to church, she says, but she can do this.

As for me, I cannot cook. I cannot play football. I cannot wash a window well, or parallel park on a hill, or give you directions to most anyplace, anywhere. There is a whole long list of things I cannot do.

But there are things I can do. A lot of them. And you've got a whole list of your own.

No matter where you are in life, do the small thing that

you can do, today. The thing that will help you and will help someone else right where you both are.

This is a great way to change a world.

For more challenges and wisdom from Claire, find her at clairediazortiz.com and get the full version of this book, *The Better Life*, at your favorite bookstore.

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