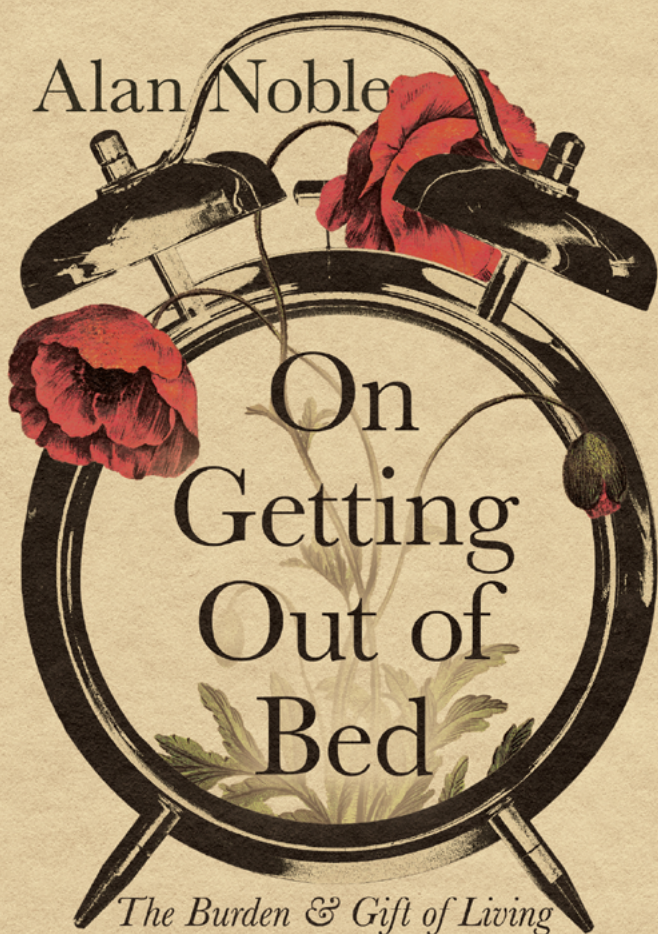


Alan Noble



InterVarsity Press
ivpress.com

Taken from *On Getting Out of Bed* by Alan Noble.

Copyright © 2023 by Alan Noble.

Published by InterVarsity Press,
Downers Grove, IL. www.ivpress.com



What's the bravest thing you ever did? . . .

Getting up this morning.

CORMAC MCCARTHY, *THE ROAD*

I'VE KNOWN A LOT OF PEOPLE who have lived painful, tragic lives. When I was young, I assumed these people were abnormal. Their suffering was the exception that proved the rule that a well-lived life is a pleasant life.

People close to me went hungry and lived in filth. Some were addicted to alcohol, meth, cocaine, and God knows what else. They were willing to do almost anything to feel alive—even overdose. Others were orphaned, abandoned, neglected, and later imprisoned. Some were molested, raped, and beaten by parents, spouses, and family friends. They all lived hard, hard lives where their daily experiences were either acute suffering or prolonged numbness. And these horrors were passed down to their children and their grandchildren. I don't know where it will end.

But as a child I assumed that these tragedies were outliers. I assumed that outside of my circle I would discover that most adults lived fairly pleasant and safe lives. Not perfect lives—not without difficulties and accidents—but generally pleasant, comfortable lives. A good job. A fulfilling marriage. An exciting sex life. A photogenic family. A sense of accomplishment. A new phone. Not too much debt. Reasonably good health. An abiding sense of happiness. Solidly middle class. Very Christian. A pleasant life. A normal life. A life I could have.

I didn't believe that I was owed this normal life. But my sense of the world and of Christianity was that if I put in the work and honored God with my time, none of these good things were out of reach. They were normal, reasonable expectations. It wasn't like I had grandiose visions of fame or riches. I just expected things to be nice if I took care of my business. And so I did.

As I grew older, my experiences mostly confirmed my expectations of what a normal life looked like. I met more people and they mostly seemed to be pretty happy. They would greet me with warm smiles and interesting conversations. They had nice things. They enjoyed themselves. Life came easy to them. Life was pleasant and safe.

The few people I met who had difficult lives seemed to choose their suffering. I could trace their problems back to a flaw in their character or intelligence. They also tended not

to be Christians, or at least not *good* Christians. From what I could see, they had decided to be miserable or depressed or a failure or whatever. And I would think, *You know, if they just made better choices, if they were just disciplined and stopped making excuses, they wouldn't have to suffer this way.*

You can walk around for a long time thinking nonsense like this—that most adults have it together and live safe, pleasant lives, and that the ones who don't only have themselves to blame. It's easy to think like Job's friends.



In fact, it's hard *not* to think like this, even when you grow up around tragedy and trauma, as I did. It's hard not to think like this because almost no one wants to tell you otherwise. There's a kind of unspoken conspiracy to ignore how difficult life is, or to reframe it as something romantic—a heroic challenge we overcome on our way to the good life. In this conspiracy we each try to hide our scars, even from those closest to us and sometimes even from ourselves. Almost every cultural institution, church, government, or corporation promises you a good life if you just do what they ask. Make the right life choices. Marry the right person. Go to the right church. Get the right education. Work the right job. Buy the right products. And you'll be fine.

Whatever challenges we face can be solved. That's society's promise. Whatever problem you have, someone has developed a method for overcoming it. A pill. A treatment. A mindset. Which means that if you *don't* overcome your problems, it's your own fault. You really should have tried harder. You should have shown more initiative. You should have chosen the right technique. Because the normal life is a pleasant life for those who merit it.

I believed all this, and I was wrong. The people close to me weren't anomalies, they were the norm. While not everyone will experience the kinds of trauma they did, suffering—even profound mental affliction and personal tragedy—is a normal part of human life. Sometimes the tragedy strikes us directly. Other times we experience it through those we love (suffering with others is its own kind of suffering, and it is no less real or significant for being indirect). One way or another, it gets us. Once I grew close to other adults, people who had seemed to “have their lives together,” that's what I discovered. Life is far more difficult than we let on.



Get to know someone really well, and almost without fail, you will discover a person who routinely struggles to get out of bed in the morning. And not just because they're tired.

They can't get out of bed because once they step foot on the floor, they will be launched into a day that is uncertain and lifeless and in some ways impossible.

Here are some things you will see if you get to know people: you'll discover someone who suffers panic attacks every time there's another mass shooting, someone who cannot stop obsessing over how they may have failed as a parent, someone who cannot eat or who cannot stop eating because of the guilt they feel from being sexually assaulted, someone with a nearly debilitating mental disorder that only manifested after they were married and had kids and now their spouse seriously considers divorce on an almost monthly basis, or someone who is stuck in the habit of living even though they feel terribly alone and bored. None of these scenarios are unusual.

Think about someone you know who is living the good life: someone well dressed, confident, smiling, high achieving, maybe even attractive and intelligent and funny. Nine times out of ten, they are carrying around something unspeakably painful. And often, when you learn *what* that pain is, it'll be something completely unexpected. You weren't even aware that people could suffer like that. Maybe you didn't know how helpless it can feel to have an adult sibling addicted to meth. Or to carry the guilt of learning that your child was abused at a sleepover. There are diseases and disorders and burdens you have never imagined, carried like boulders on the backs

of the same people who smile and tell you that they are doing “good.” Every time you ask them, “How’s it going?” they’ll say, “Good! I’m doing good. How about you?” Maybe they don’t trust you, or they are terrified to vocalize their suffering. But maybe they just don’t know *how* to say how bad they feel. So why should they even try?

Most of these people will show no obvious signs of the despair that follows them around, or at least those signs will be subtle and veiled. They might surface in a prayer request (“Can I just ask you guys to pray for a stressful situation at work?”), sudden moodiness, or distracting addictions like social media or porn or work. But mostly these people are high-functioning adults.

We may go through periods where we break down and stare blankly at our email inbox, or debate whether to get out of bed, or feel we can’t physically move, but for the most part, we function. We get up. We eat. We work. We buy things. We are entertained. We are stimulated. We sleep. But the darkness is there, waiting for the right moment to re-assert itself. And it does. Unbidden and unwanted and too often unavoidable.

You may never experience long-term, intense depression or anxiety, but there will very likely be a period of your life when you feel something similar, as if you are a ghost haunting your own life.

Living in a society governed by *technique* conditions us to believe that in every way life is easier than it ever has been. Technique is the use of rational methods to maximize efficiency, and we see it everywhere: time-saving technology, apps that maximize our workouts, drugs that drown out our anxiety, ubiquitous entertainment in our pockets, and scientifically proven methods for parenting, working, eating, shopping, budgeting, folding clothes, sleeping, sex, dating, and buying a car.³ The promise of technique is that we are collectively overcoming all the challenges to life through research, technology, and discipline. All you have to do is find the right self-help book or life hack or app or life coach or devotional.

But technique's promise that life is easier than ever turns out to be just another source of dread and shame: if life doesn't *have* to be this hard, if there are answers and methods and practices that can solve my problems, then it really *is* my fault that I'm overwhelmed or a failure. That's not to say that there aren't external forces that shape our lives: a corrupt political system can disadvantage us, we all have character flaws, and some people have a genetic advantage. But we have methods for overcoming these obstacles. There's always another technique I can use to fight a corrupt political system, improve my character, and compensate for my biology. So if I'm not living to my full potential, I'm to blame for not taking advantage of these methods.

This is one reason why we don't want to be honest when someone asks us how we are doing. Why admit to failure or weakness? If we tell the truth, they'll start offering advice, recommending some new method for "fixing" our problem, for overcoming anxiety or achieving our fullest potential or whatever. By the time they are done, we'll just feel the weight of a new obligation, another method to try, and another chance to fail. "Have you tried this diet?" "I heard regular exercise can improve your mental health. Maybe that's your problem." "Here's a book on prayer." "I heard this scientist on a podcast talk about how your mental disorder can actually be treated by drinking more water."

If you suffer from a chronic mental illness, these conversations can be particularly humiliating because they remind you of all the things that have already failed to cure you. And you just feel tired of the whole thing.

On top of the unmanageable burden technique places on our lives, our society is hypercompetitive. Everyone is vying for attention and validation. Publicly announcing your suffering, whether formally diagnosed or not, can be a real liability. While there is less stigma associated with things like mental illness than in the past, competing in the job market (or the marriage "market" or whatever) is hard enough without publicizing your weakness.

BUY THE BOOK!

ivpress.com/on-getting-out-of-bed