

# English Lessons

THE CROOKED PATH OF  
GROWING TOWARD FAITH



Andrea Lucado

Praise for  
**English Lessons**

“Luminous patience and insight lights these uncommonly thoughtful pages. Andrea Lucado is a winsome, wise, and unwaveringly honest companion for the wonderer and wanderer, and the lines on these pages offer a tangible lifeline to every God-wrestler. These are pages that are hard to put down, that you will want to return to and reread. Andrea not only offers a genuine way to love the questions themselves, she offers an authentic way to love the Answer Himself.”

—ANN VOSKAMP, author of the *New York Times* bestsellers  
*The Broken Way* and *One Thousand Gifts*

“This book brought me right back to a younger self—a bookish pastor’s daughter living abroad, making sense of her faith, of the world and her place in it. Andrea is a lovely writer, and this story will make you ache for the feelings and memories and experiences of your early twenties—both the wonderful ones and the challenging ones. And it will make you want to go to Oxford, of course.”

—SHAUNA NIEQUIST, *New York Times* best-selling author  
of *Present Over Perfect* and *Bread & Wine*

“*English Lessons* is positively paradoxical—both mature and youthful, entertaining and challenging, full of light and full of depth. Written by a pastor’s daughter, it is the perfect book for those trying to own a faith handed to them by someone else. Whether you’re a spiritual seeker or a hardened skeptic, this book will both honor your doubts and open your heart to grace. A wonderful paradox, indeed!”

—JONATHAN MERRITT, contributing writer for *The Atlantic*  
and author of *Jesus Is Better Than You Imagined*

“To have a strong faith we can stand on, we all need to wrestle well with hard questions and come face-to-face with our gut-honest feelings. Andrea does this in such a tenderly beautiful way that will leave the deep parts of your heart feeling comforted and understood.”

—LYSA TERKEURST, *New York Times* best-selling author  
and president of Proverbs 31 Ministries

“In *English Lessons* we discover an honest voice exploring life and love, finding that it’s okay and even common to not know where the journey will take you. Andrea Lucado’s memoir is a story of love and friendship, saying goodbyes, and seeing yourself in a mirror to find out more of who you really are, perhaps for the first time. Her year in Oxford was a wide-open space for a life of grace.”

—SCOT MCKNIGHT, Julius R. Mantey Chair of New  
Testament, Northern Seminary

“English Lessons is one of those beautiful books that you can just fall into. Andrea’s story, her retelling, her insight, her heart—it all shines. I love this book, I learned from it, and I cannot wait to read it again.”

—ANNIE F. DOWNS, best-selling author of *Looking for  
Lovely* and *Let’s All Be Brave*

“In this vivid and vulnerable memoir, Andrea Lucado allows readers to experience both the charms and the challenges of living in a foreign place. Andrea’s story gives readers permission to have faith like a child, questions like a teenager, and steady trust like an adult. If you want your own faith to grow and to grow up, this well-rendered story is for you.”

—KATELYN BEATY, editor at large, *Christianity Today*,  
and author of *A Woman’s Place*

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WATERBROOK

## ENGLISH LESSONS

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Details in some anecdotes and stories have been changed to protect the identities of the persons involved.

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*For my parents, and always for my parents*



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# English Lesson

Life cannot be understood flat on a page. It has to be lived; a person has to get out of his head, has to fall in love, has to memorize poems, has to jump off bridges into rivers, has to stand in an empty desert and whisper sonnets under his breath:

I'll tell you how the sun rose,  
A ribbon at a time . . . <sup>1</sup>

And so my prayer is that your story will have involved some leaving and some coming home, some summer and some winter, some roses blooming out like children in a play. My hope is your story will be about changing, about getting something beautiful born inside of you, about learning to love a woman or a man, about learning to love a child, about moving yourself around water, around mountains, around friends, about learning to love others more than we love ourselves, about learning oneness as a way of understanding God. We get

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1. Emily Dickinson, *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*, Part 2, Nature.

one story, you and I, and one story alone. God has established the elements, the setting and the climax and the resolution. It would be a crime not to venture out, wouldn't it?

It might be time for you to go. It might be time to change, to shine out.

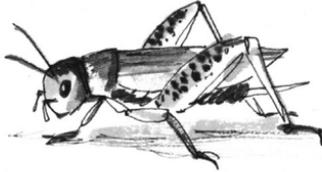
I want to repeat one word for you:

*Leave.*

Roll the word around on your tongue for a bit. It is a beautiful word, isn't it? So strong and forceful, the way you have always wanted to be. And you will not be alone. You have never been alone. Don't worry. Everything will still be here when you get back. It is you who will have changed.

—Donald Miller, *Through Painted Deserts*

# I



## Field Crickets

Church was not a part of my childhood. It was my childhood. Church, growing up—they twine themselves in my memories. They are the same color, indistinguishable. From my younger years, I remember more about the building itself than the words said within it. I remember the pews were classic, sturdy ones with rough blue cushions that fit nicely and would give you carpet burn if you crawled along them for too long. I remember the communion table from a vantage point underneath it, looking through the wooden slats and holding on to them,

demanding my friends “let me out of jail.” I remember where the communion grape juice and yeast-free crackers were stored, in the closet to the right of the stage in the auditorium. Sometimes we shoveled the crackers into our mouths while our parents had postchurch, prelunch conversations with fellow church members for what felt like forever.

Many Sundays, when I finished stealing the communion crackers, I was off to find my mom so I could tug at her, pull her arm in the direction of the door, and make it perfectly clear I was ready to leave. She was so good at not budging, standing her ground and remaining in conversation with whomever it was, as if a child were not yelling, “Mom! Mom! Mooom!” over and over at her side.

The church was built in the 1950s. Not beautiful, in a strange octagonal shape on a road called Fredericksburg. Home is what it felt like most of the time. So many people knew my name there. I didn’t know their names, but I wasn’t expected to. They heard my dad talk about me from the pulpit each week. I never heard their dads talk about them. Their faces were enough for me. Synonymous with the building itself. For me so many members existed only inside that building, as if they emerged from the walls on Sunday mornings and melted back into them afterward.

My neighborhood streets were the back hallways and classrooms of that octagonal-shaped building. My neighborhood friends were the daughters of elders and staff members. We got to know each other lingering outside our fathers’ offices, playing hide-and-seek. We did church-league basketball together and popped gum during Sunday school together. When we reached the sixth grade, we decided, to-

gether, that we had outgrown the church playground and developed the habit of forming circles to talk and gossip with our arms crossed, our weight on one foot, hips out to one side.

Church determined my social life as well as my weekly calendar. Sunday mornings were busy; therefore, Saturday night was early curfew night, a rule I openly hated and disagreed with until the day I left home for college. Sunday nights were for small-group gatherings called life groups. Wednesdays were for midweek service. Spring break was the youth ski trip to Colorado. Christmas was always spent at home because of Christmas Eve service. Summer was for church camp. This is what I knew. This is what deep down, beneath my teenage angst and complaining, I loved. I grew up in church and church grew down into me, as if my body housed a tree of church lessons whose limbs grew inside me and rooted my feet into the church's ground itself.

This is why when people talk about how wonderful their childhood church experience was, or how terrible it was, it's difficult for me to understand why they don't simply say growing up was wonderful or growing up was terrible. How are those two things not twined for them like they are for me?

When your father has been a pastor at the same church in the same city for three decades, people come to recognize your family. At school, everyone knew I was a preacher's daughter. At church, I was Max's, the pastor's daughter.

For some, faith and belief are learned over time, understood and accepted. For those like me, faith and belief have been written into your name. Your family's profession is, in a way, Christianity. It makes

“owning one’s faith” an impossible and confusing feat. For how could I own my last name more than I already do?

Considering my background, you can imagine how I relate to someone with a completely unchurched childhood. That person might as well be from a tiny island off the coast of nowhere near the edge of the universe. This is why when I found myself one day in the early fall of 2008 sitting in a classroom surrounded by tiny islands off the coasts of nowhere near the edge of the universe, I marveled. Nothing about us, our pasts, or our backgrounds braided together. We were from different countries and different continents with the common goal of achieving master’s degrees in English Literature. Now we have all returned to our respective origins, but then we had landed mere blocks from each other in a city called Oxford in a country called England.

Oxford. The place that makes you want to write books about it. It sucks in students from various nations on this earth, plops them together into graduating classes, and then either promptly shuttles them back home or loses them in its dark office corridors forever. I got out. Though it would have been magical to stay.

It was orientation day at Oxford Brookes University when I first met them all, the tiny islands. I left my parents waving at the bottom of a hill as I climbed up toward campus. Mom and Dad had flown over with me to help with the transition, and walking away from them that afternoon felt harder than it should have for a twenty-two-year-old. I left too early, worried I would be late, so I walked slowly as I neared the building.

I had been to Oxford before. As a junior in college, I participated

in a study-abroad program there. My three best friends and I made the journey from Abilene Christian University in West Texas all the way to England to spend four months living with fellow American students and traveling on the weekends. We clutched our Rick Steves guides and felt very grown up as we sat in pubs at the ripe, legal age of twenty. We drank espresso and red wine during a memorable weeklong trip to Italy. We learned how to buy train tickets and book hostels, and we often huddled together on our bunk beds and listed the things from home we longed for: our cars, Mexican food, big grocery stores, Sonic. When we landed at the Dallas/Fort Worth International Airport in December, we felt relief and triumph. We had survived a semester overseas. And I vowed quietly to myself that one day I would return.

I don't think two more opposite cities exist, Oxford and Abilene. One is in the Cotswolds, known for endless waves of countryside at the cost of endless waves of rain. The other is in the part of Texas known for tumbleweeds, oil, more wind and dust than rain, and, of course, the occasional dreaded cricket infestation.



I call it The Summer of the Crickets, and I can still feel its heat. Thick, consuming heat that settled and lingered over Abilene adamantly for three months. I had stayed in Abilene for my last summer before my senior year. I took summer school in the morning and worked in the afternoon, and then at night, when it was finally safe to go outside without absolutely melting, I would run around campus. Even though

the sun had been down for hours, I still dripped all the way. Hot and humid—the ideal environment for cricket reproduction. Every few years Abilene and other regions in Texas are overrun by crickets that hatch in warm, moist environments. That summer they took over. In the building where my summer class met, an entire wall fell victim to crickets. Thousands of them spread out among the bricks, claimed their space, and held on until fall. I don't think they moved for months. Each morning the wall of crickets remained. Class was canceled a couple of times due to the smell. Decaying crickets, I learned, have a distinct smell, similar to the aroma of stale Mexican-food leftovers with a little fresh fertilizer mixed in. Pleasant. Intoxicating.

One morning I showed up at my Latin American Authors class to find that my professor, who was also a decent artist, had drawn a picture on the whiteboard of a giant cricket with bulging red eyes and a gas mask. The picture remained on the whiteboard for weeks. I stared at it each day while he lectured. I hated those crickets. They left us alone in the classrooms, but the moment we entered the hallway, they hurled their bodies from one wall to the opposite one, creating an obstacle course between us and the exit. To make it from one building to the next was to run a cricket gantlet. I rarely made it through without getting hit. I think hell might be an eternal summer of crickets living, multiplying, and dying. There is nothing worse than your world being overrun by an insect you can't control. Kill one, turn around, and there are thirty others. You have no choice but to coexist with them until the cooler weather kills them off.

I've since learned that this particular cricket infestation was one of

the worst Abilene had seen in years. The crickets we were stepping on and running away from are known as field crickets. This name sounds inaccurate to me. I think they should be called “field, road, building, bathroom, inside-your-own-freaking-car crickets.” But I’m not the expert here. I started to do more research in order to understand this species better and why they came out with such a vengeance that summer in West Texas, but I decided the creatures that ruined my life those few months were not worth the time and effort to be fully understood. I don’t care about their biological origins, and I certainly don’t care about their benefits to our ecosystem. So my cricket knowledge is limited. I do know they can lay up to four hundred eggs at once—a fact that both terrifies and annoys me—and I know they shed their skin up to nine times before becoming adult crickets. The process of shedding skin is called “molting”—an appropriately gross-sounding word, I think. *Moooolllllting*. It takes about six weeks for the molting process to be complete and the cricket to reach full-fledged adulthood. Then they mate and lay trillions of eggs. Then, they die. Well, some live for three or four more weeks enjoying their molted state, but most of them die.

One lifetime, nine layers.



I should probably explain that Oxford Brookes University is a separate university from the one I like to call *Oxford* Oxford. It is more recently established—though I suppose everything is more recently established

than a university where teachers were already teaching in AD 1096—and it uses lecture-style teaching rather than the intimate tutorial style used at *Oxford* Oxford. To distinguish between the two, most refer to Oxford Brookes as simply Brookes. Heaven forbid I should claim to be an *Oxford* Oxford student, when really I was just a normal old Brookes student. The Brookes campus is mostly concentrated in one place, on top of Headington Hill. Headington Hill boasts a city view I rarely saw. My classes were at night, so the view I remember best is distant blurs of lights, spires, and fields asleep in the dark. The daylight hours revealed lush mounds of grass playing leapfrog down the hill, a hill that was always damp from rain. Sitting at the bottom was the city center of Oxford—a dignified gathering of sixteenth-century buildings. Lined up and standing so close together, they formed one brilliant, cream-colored stone mass. Strong and old.

As I neared the building where I had been instructed to go for orientation, I felt like I might throw up. I had no idea what I was doing. I had no idea where I was going. Everything in me wanted to run all the way back down that hill into my dad's arms and ask my mom if we could go home. But I had kept my vow to return to Oxford. I had applied and been accepted. It would be silly to go back now. So I pushed through the doors, held my breath, and hoped for the best.



I searched the room for a friendly face. There were a couple of guys standing by a table of snacks and a few people in the corner who

looked like professors discussing an important piece of paper. And then I saw one. She was sitting down. She looked about my age and like someone I would have been friends with back home, and the seats beside her were empty. I made a beeline in her direction and sat down in the chair to her right.

“Hi,” I said, feeling dry mouth coming on. “I’m Andrea.”

“I’m Sophie,” she said.

“Nice to meet you.”

Sophie nodded.

“Are you from here?” I asked.

“No, no. I’m from South Africa.”

“Really? That’s so cool.”

Sophie laughed. “Where are you from?”

“America. I mean, the States. I mean, Texas. Have you heard of Texas?”

Sophie laughed again. “Yes, I’ve heard of it.” George W. Bush had been president for the last eight years. Of course she had heard of Texas.

Someone called for everybody to take their seats. After the program director made some introductions, we circled around the room saying our name and country of origin. I took inventory. There were about twenty of us, representing four different nations: England, India, South Africa, and the United States.

I was one of two Americans and, I would soon learn from various opinions voiced during class discussions, one of one Christian. I sat in my chair with my back straight and eyes unblinking and watched

them, the tiny islands off the coasts of nowhere near the edge of the universe. So no one else in this room was like me? A pastor's daughter. A graduate of a Christian high school, where most of her friends were Christians. And now, a graduate of a Christian college, where she had only Christian friends. An employee of a Christian camp in the summers, and someone whose handful of dates were with only Christian guys. I was in a Christian sorority, the whole thing. My life to that point had been the picture of Christian-ness, and Oxford was photo-bombing my pretty Christian picture.

Though since birth I had spent more time inside the church walls than outside them, I had also been gifted with the ability to incessantly ask questions about my faith, which had been known to lead to periods of skepticism. My dad tells this story from when I was five years old. He was teaching me and my two sisters about the Garden of Eden. In the middle of the story, I interrupted. "Wait, if God didn't want Adam and Eve to eat from the tree, why'd he put it in the garden?" And thus my impulsively inquisitive nature reared its head. Such questions and concerns have never quite left me. I've always felt the need to ask *why?* until I get a sufficient answer.

In high school there had been a few dark and doubting months. As I recall, it started while I was outside running in our neighborhood one day. I was trying to pray, and for the first time since I had become a Christian at age nine, I felt like no one was listening to me. Instead of God's presence, I felt an emptiness, and this upset me. My logical teenage reasoning said if I couldn't feel God, he wasn't there. And if he wasn't there, I didn't have to follow his rules. And if I didn't have to

follow his rules, I could do whatever I wanted. So I did, sort of, for a few months. It was a brief, slightly rebellious—by preacher’s daughter standards—time in my life. And it was brought to an abrupt halt as soon as I got caught.

One of my slightly rebellious activities was sneaking out of the house. I thought sneaking out was so fun and exhilarating and, well, sneaky. One night while spending the night at my friend Leslie’s, we decided, in our wisdom and maturity, to sneak out of her house and go meet up with some boys who were smoking pot. Everything went well, as it usually did. Nobody heard us leave. Nobody heard us come in. We were pros, and the night was a success. The next morning, however, was not.

A few hours after I returned home from Leslie’s, I got a phone call. It was from Leslie’s mom. Leslie had been overcome by a wave of guilt about what we had done the night before and told her mom everything. Now, Leslie’s mom told me, either I could tell my mom or she would have to. Understandable, since Leslie’s mom and my mom were good friends.

At the time, neither my mom nor my dad knew I had been doing things like sneaking out of the house. They knew I was struggling with doubt and uncertainty, but they didn’t know about the recent proclamation I had made to myself that I could now do whatever I wanted because I didn’t feel God’s presence anymore. After I got off the phone with Leslie’s mom, and after the sickness in my stomach subsided a little, I walked into my mom’s room and told her everything. I told her I had been lying to her about where I was on the

weekends. I told her I had snuck out of Leslie's house to hang out with boys who were smoking pot. I cried and cried and told her more details than I was planning to. She cried right along with me. She was surprised and disappointed I am sure, but I don't remember a harsh scolding or a sermon. Mostly what I remember is my mom hurting with me in an empathetic way I had not expected. And later, when my dad heard about everything, he grounded me for three weeks, but he also understood, and he also didn't yell or kick me out of the house. I saw grace in my parents that day, a grace that eventually led me back to its source.

Now in Oxford, in a class of no Christians and in a city and country that was located nowhere near the Bible Belt, I worried that I might lose the feeling of God's presence again. And if I did, how would I react this time so far away from home? Being in Oxford felt like being sixteen years old again, without the excuse of being sixteen.



As much as I hated those field crickets in Abilene that summer, I can't help but see now how like them we are, especially in those confusing years of early adulthood. The "twenties" as some call it, though I suppose this phase is not restricted to one decade. I wish our stories were more similar to the process of caterpillars turning to butterflies. That metamorphosis is such a beautiful picture, with time spent in the chrysalis (such a lovely word). But I think the reality of becoming an adult looks much more like that of a cricket nymph and its gross, pain-

ful molting process as the little runt emerges from the ground for the first time, squinting at its surroundings, struggling from one place to the other, losing skin all along the way. Probably feeling small, afraid, and lost and clinging on to building walls when it just doesn't know what else to do or where else to go.

I emerged from the ground in Oxford as a good Christian girl from the friendly state of Texas. I was twenty-two years old. I had been to college. I thought I knew things about the world and how it should be. I thought I knew about faith and God. But when I squinted my eyes at this foreign city and my new surroundings, I quickly learned that many of the things I thought I knew—about me, about faith, about others—were not necessarily true over here, in this other place, this other world. Almost as soon as I got to Oxford, I felt lost. I wandered its streets looking as cricket-nymph-like as one can possibly look. I searched for a safe wall to grab on to. A place that looked or felt like home. I looked for the God of my childhood, the faith of my childhood. But it wasn't there. I never found any rough blue pew cushions in Oxford as hard as I looked.



The newness and foreignness of Oxford shook me up and out and everywhere, in a way that made Oxford a scary and hard but necessary beginning for me.

Growing up, no matter when growing up happens, requires shedding layers. Especially when it comes to growing more mature in faith.

In order to learn new things, you must first unlearn old things to make space for the new things. The whole process is very sacrificial in nature, which is why it feels hard and painful and sad at any given moment. You are giving away parts of your very self, things you always held to be true. But you have to. In order to become more of the person you are, in order to believe in the God who actually is, you must get rid of the old parts that no longer make sense, revealing the truth that lies underneath. Christian Wiman wrote in his book *My Bright Abyss*, “Doubt is painful . . . but its pain is active rather than passive, purifying rather than stultifying. Far beneath it, no matter how severe its drought, how thoroughly your skepticism seems to have salted the ground of your soul, faith, durable faith, is steadily taking root.”<sup>2</sup> I like this idea of faith lying beneath the doubt because it means that what we are looking for is within us and not outside us. When we first come out of the ground, it looks like we have a long way to travel, but really we don’t have to travel to some place or arrive at some external location to find what we are looking for. We don’t have to, but sometimes it does help.

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2. Christian Wiman, *My Bright Abyss* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013), 76.

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