VIVIAN MABUNI

OFEN HANDS WILLING HEARTSNEAK



UNCORRECTED PROOF

Discover the Joy of Saying Yes to God

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OPEN HANDS, WILLING HEART

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Dedicated with love to Julia,
my favorite daughter, truly the world's best.
And to my amazing nieces, Cheyenne, Whitney,
Lexi, Angel, and Lauren.

May you live with intention and abandon to our King. May you walk in joy and freedom. May your lives shine brightly as you display God's glory through every part of your story.

The future is full of hope because of women like you.



In memory of Danielle Montiel.

You lived your time on earth with open hands and a willing heart. Your prayer posture has become my own. I am confident Jesus greeted you with the hugest embrace and a hearty "Well done!" Can't wait to see you again.

A life well lived is a life surrendered.



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Foreword

he subject of surrender is familiar to me. Sometimes I think it may be the only thing I've gotten right in my life. I've committed myself to say yes to God's leading, and He's moved in incredible ways. So many times I've said yes when it didn't make sense, and only years later did His plan become clear to me. Over and over He's used my yes to build amazing stories like IF:Gathering, which is where I got to meet Vivian.

Vivian is a yes kind of girl too, which is why her life is full of miracles, both in her family and in the lives of the many who count her as a spiritual mother. She even walked with open hands through the intense suffering of cancer. She says yes when she can't see the path ahead, and God shows up every time.

In college I was discipled through a ministry called Cru, and in many ways I can thank the leaders of that organization for my yes kind of faith. I'm grateful for how they taught me to love discipleship and live it as the primary goal of my life.

Cru is also where Vivian has spent her life saying yes. Every time I see her vibrant smile, I also see a string of younger women whose lives she's pouring herself into. And isn't that one of the best reasons to say



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yes? To invest ourselves in the lives of a few people who will love God more because we were here? That's something Vivian has mastered and cares about deeply.

Our choice to say yes is rarely easy, but it's our sacrifice that gives meaning to our surrender. Most of my yeses have cost me in different ways, but all of them have been worth it: adopting, carrying casseroles across the street for neighbors who just moved in, teaching the Bible to one or a thousand, having hard conversations, and saying yes in all the unseen circumstances of everyday life. It's worth it. All of it is worth it. When we get to heaven, we'll celebrate every yes we said and the ways God used our short lives for His eternal purposes.

We have much to learn from Vivian through the pages of this book. And one day when we all get to heaven, I'll be right there to hug and thank this beautiful woman for her willingness to say yes to running this race beside me and to sharing God with others in ways that have shaped eternity.

—Jennie Allen, founder and visionary, IF:Gathering

Part 1

A WILLING HEART

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A Posture of the Heart

No one can sum up all God is able to accomplish through one solitary life, wholly yielded, adjusted, and obedient to Him.

—D. L. Moody

The hot sun beat down relentlessly on sixteen-year-old Florence. Her stomach rumbled as she brushed sweat from her brow. As the firstborn of her siblings, she shouldered many household responsibilities, including finding adequate places for the family's cows to graze. Like many other Rwandans in the 1960s, Florence's parents had fled their homeland and crossed into neighboring Uganda as refugees fleeing political upheaval and bloodshed. Florence, born in Uganda, gave her life to Christ as a fifteen-year-old. She remembers praying and setting in her heart a memorial.

"You never, ever forget about this decision. It is a special thing you have done."



On this particular day while tending the cows, Florence unsuccessfully searched for fruit among the bushes. Barefoot, hungry, thirsty, and hot, Florence longed for more. As she looked around at her environment and considered the projected path for girls her age, she knew unless something changed, her current circumstances would keep her walking long distances to fetch water and lacking opportunity to do what she most desired.

Florence recalls with both vividness and fondness the exact area near the rocks and stones where God led her. The rock she stood on became another memorial, the place she prayed her first prayer of deep commitment and surrender. As the first believer in her family, and brand-new in her faith, she didn't know the exact mechanics of how to pray. She knew only to bring to God her deepest heart desire. With honesty and sincerity she prayed, "Jesus, if You are really real, would You give me education?" Added to this heartfelt prayer, she promised, "If You give me education, I will commit to serve You forever and tell everyone how great You are."

Florence's simple prayer of surrender released control of her life to her heavenly Father. Her hands now opened to have the Lord take and give as He saw fit.

Land of a Thousand Hills

A few years ago on a trip to Rwanda, I had the joy of hearing and seeing how God answered Florence's prayer.

Rwanda. A vibrant land filled with vibrant people who are resilient and remarkable. The country continues to make tremendous strides after the horrific genocide that took place in 1994, when



government officials carried out plans for the mass extermination of an entire ethnic people group and any sympathizers. Between April and July more than eight hundred thousand men, women, and children died from the mass slaughter over the course of ninety days. In addition to the torturous deaths, an estimated five hundred thousand women were raped and intentionally infected with HIV. The aftermath of the genocide left four hundred thousand orphans. The brutality, cruelty, and horror remain unfathomable. But I saw with my own eyes how out of death and what seemed irreparable, God brought new life.

I was privileged to be part of a team of twenty-two women who traveled to Rwanda to experience firsthand the beautiful ministry God is doing in and through the women there. The trip rose out of a mutually beneficial partnership between Africa New Life ministry (ANL) in Rwanda and IF: Gathering, a worldwide Christian movement founded by my friend Jennie Allen with a mission to gather, equip, and unleash women to live out God's calling for their lives.

I have had the honor of teaching and equipping leaders through IF and have forged relationships with incredible women who, like Jennie, love God fiercely. For that trip in the summer of 2017, God put together a team composed of women from different parts of the country, with different stories, bringing different gifts, living in different stages of life, and experiencing different life circumstances. God used our differences to meet each situation we encountered. We lived out the truth of how we are better together. God taught me about faith, dedication, trust, and dependence through these new sisters when our feet hit the red soil of Rwanda.

Our first day in Rwanda, we toured the ANL ministry center. Still



new to each other and learning names, while adjusting to the elevation and time change, our team assembled to hear about the early days of the ministry from one of the founders, Florence Mugisha.

Florence paced slowly back and forth before us as she recounted her story, including her teenage prayer of surrender. Eight years after Florence began a relationship with Jesus, she began attending a Bible college in Uganda. There she met her future husband, Charles. Both Rwandans, Florence and Charles longed to return home to minister to the orphan children left behind after the genocide. After they married, they served at a church in Uganda where they received no monthly paycheck. They welcomed their first son, Isaac, and entered a time of what Florence described as "crazy faith." Their refrigerator sat empty when an unexpected gift of one hundred euros arrived from a donor in England. An opportunity to sponsor nine Rwandan children opened up around the same time. Charles asked Florence if they could give the money they received to the children so they could attend school.

Charles didn't push. Florence struggled. They had no food. They needed milk. But something she'd once heard played in her mind: "Small, painful seeds give rise to huge ministries." She wondered, *Could this be the seed?* She explained to us, "It wasn't exciting, but it was an opportunity, and I knew I needed to say yes."

In November 2000 God opened doors for their small family to move to Portland, Oregon, to study at Multnomah University. Before they moved to America, they sold or gave away their belongings in Uganda, including all their wedding presents. They lived in the basement of a home of a host family in exchange for babysitting and taking



care of the laundry and housework. Everything felt strange and unfamiliar. Florence didn't know anyone, her family lived thousands of miles away, and she felt lonely and out of place. But through her willingness to sacrifice and do whatever God asked, her relationship with Him deepened.

Florence dreamed of someday owning a house in Rwanda, a small two-bedroom home for her little family that they would not have to rent. To her surprise the host family paid her when she babysat. Florence saved up every penny. As much as she wanted to go shopping at the fancy malls, she refrained, saving every dollar for her future home. Over time she saved \$1,000.

Two years later Charles and Florence traveled back to Rwanda to determine next steps for the ministry God had placed on their hearts. Seeing firsthand the orphans, the widows, the refugees, and the hurting families broke their hearts. The needs they saw before them compelled them to look into how they could formally begin to help. They felt led to rent a small home to start a preschool as a springboard for future ministry. Charles learned that in order to register a ministry to receive wire transfers and funds, they needed to set up a bank account.

Charles turned to Florence. "Can we use your money?"

Florence did see the money as hers. She had been the one to work the long hours watching the hosts' children. She had been the one to wash and fold all the laundry. Of the money she had earned, she hadn't spent a penny on herself. She had sacrificed to save for her dream. Now Charles had the audacity (or perhaps the faith?) to ask Florence for the money to open the bank account and rent the small home.



Charles didn't push. Florence wrestled. It didn't seem fair. But more than to own her own home, the desire of Florence's heart was to please God and glorify Him. Once again she opened her hands, and in faith she gave what she had to the Lord and to Charles.

Hearing Florence share her story, I couldn't hold back tears. We were sitting in the Dream Center, which grew out of the seed money she'd relinquished to the Lord. Her example of living with open hands and a willing heart touched tens of thousands of lives. I marveled thinking about the more than nine thousand children now sponsored by their organization. Florence continued to be burdened for the women in Rwanda, so she also began a ministry to help at-risk women learn vocational skills. Our team worshipped with the ninety women enrolled in the year-long sewing and beauty-school program. Another ministry sponsored by ANL is the Africa College of Theology. The 576 seminary students enrolled come from all over Rwanda and neighboring countries. The seminary trains and equips pastors and recently added book-printing facilities. Multnomah University donated twenty thousand books to the seminary library, now one of the largest libraries in Rwanda. Later our group toured the Dream Medical Center and visited the schools and churches established in other cities across the country. Over and over Florence and her family had sacrificed and followed God's leading, and He had shown Himself faithful.

Open-Handed Living

As women after God's heart, you and I desire to please God and be aligned with His will. We want to be used by Him and experience the peace and fulfillment He wants for us. It's all too easy, though, to fall



into living mechanically, with a rule-based approach to the Christian life, or to get too focused on what we want when we want it. When life isn't unfolding the way we thought it would, we wonder if we're on track with who He would have us be and what He would have us do. We long for more fulfillment, contentment, and meaning, but above all we want to see our lives from His perspective and experience more of Him.

The path to saying yes to whatever God asks often feels scary, though, and the distractions of this world get in the way even when we want to be willing. But open-handed living is worth everything it asks of us because it makes our day-to-day lives more purposeful, powerful, and pleasing to God. When our hearts are surrendered to Him and aligned with His will, we draw closer to Him in a way that unleashes His grand purposes for our lives.

What I have learned over several decades of following Jesus is that the essence of surrender is in the posture of our hearts. It is the spirit of following Jesus with hands and hearts open, humbly letting go of whatever we tend to clutch and control as we seek His perspective in all things. When we are in this place of surrender, we give the Holy Spirit free rein to direct and sustain our journey and we realize that our lives are part of a much greater story: God's story of hope and restoration in the lives of individuals, families, communities, churches, and society.

Not long before his death, Henri Nouwen wrote in *Sabbatical Journeys* about some friends who were trapeze artists. They shared with Nouwen about the special relationship between flyer and catcher on the trapeze. The flyer lets go, and the catcher catches. As the flyer swings high above the crowd on the trapeze, the moment comes when



she must let go. She arcs out into the air, where her sole job is to remain as still as possible as she opens her hands and waits for the strong hands of the catcher to pluck her to safety. One of the trapeze artists told Nouwen, "The flyer must never try to catch the catcher." The catcher will catch the flyer, but she must wait in absolute trust. Similarly, openhanded living calls us to let go in the midst of risk and uncertainty, aligning our heart posture and choices with God's will for our lives.

My first big surrender came shortly after beginning a relationship with Jesus in high school. My dad went through a midlife crisis, which included a fancy sports car (woo-hoo!) followed by a perm (another story, another time) and then the news that we would be moving right before my senior year from Colorado to Hong Kong. Angry and confused, I unleashed my frustration and let God know exactly how I felt about the situation. But at the end of my tirade, I added a sincere "In my heart of hearts, I really want to know You and do Your will." In Hong Kong I gave God control of my life at a whole new level. I moved over and let Him have the driver's seat. He would be the Good Shepherd who would lead and provide—the center, the source, the focus. I would give Him first place in my life and let Him take me wherever He thought best.

I came to another crossroads as I graduated from college. Law school? Vocational Christian ministry? Serving God in an international setting seemed exciting and even glamorous to my twenty-something self. I wasn't afraid to minister overseas, but I did wrestle with what I considered my worst-case scenario: driving an ugly, outdated car and living in complete isolation and obscurity doing boring, mundane work day in and day out. Nevertheless, I remember praying a tearful but sincere prayer of surrender: "God, I will go wherever You



want me to go—even if You ask me to drive one of those old station wagons with fake wood paneling on the outside and to work and live all alone. Even then I will choose to follow You."

Each time I've placed my heart, life, plans, hopes, and dreams into the hands of my loving, good, strong, faithful, able, and all-knowing God, it has simultaneously been easier and harder. Looking back, I see that His faithfulness has proved to be unwavering, so making the choice to trust Him seems the most reasonable option. Yet what God asks me to trust Him with sometimes requires more of me as my life progresses and grows more complicated. I find there is more at stake.

When faced with my own cancer diagnosis a few years ago, I prayed another surrender prayer. Every morning I awakened in the dark with my mind racing, wondering if the diagnosis was a bad dream. As my mind cleared and the heavy reality set in, I would make my way upstairs to my little nook where I poured out my fears to the God I have learned to trust. I wrestled with what seemed like reasonable, honorable desires of living to witness the major milestones in my three kids' lives. I wanted a front-row seat. The willingness to yield my plans and open my hands, even to let go of my very life, became a moment-by-moment choice.

Sometimes, though, I find myself trying to manipulate God; I want to control the outcome of my circumstances. I pray with directives: "This is how You need to answer, God, and this is how You need to fix this situation." But over the years I've come to realize that no two situations are alike and God will deliver in the way He sees fit. Each time He does it a little differently so that we learn to rely on *Him* rather than on a formula that worked in the past, a business model we read in a book, our personal gifts, or our previous experience.



Consider what this implies about how God works in your life. Take a moment and look at your left thumb. The combination of lines and swirls that make your thumbprint belongs to you alone. No one on this planet of 7.5 billion people shares the same print. That you are reading or listening to this book right now means you are still on special assignment. God crafts unique purposes for you, giving you the opportunity to participate as He unfolds His plans. Maybe you are struggling over important life scenarios: your marital status, your finances, your job, your children, your character defects, or your health. Perhaps an unhealthy relationship has taken center stage in your life and God is asking you to let go and turn the relationship over to Him. Perhaps God has given you clarity on an area of disobedience and is calling you to confess and turn from the sin. God may be calling you to live more purposefully, less busily, or less complacently. Maybe you are finally getting honest about your eating disorder, addiction, anxiety, or depression, and God is asking you to humble yourself and seek help from a trained professional. Perhaps His Spirit is encouraging you to forgive the person who hurt you, or He wants you to get out from under the weight of trying to please others and follow their will rather than His.

When I read Scripture, I am reminded of how God is the one who determines our boundaries and the exact places we should live (Acts 17:26). He makes no mistakes as He skillfully weaves us together in our mothers' wombs (Psalm 139:13). We are born into this world without control over our family of origin; we have no say in who our parents are, the number of siblings we grow up with, or our birth order. We have no control over our gender, ethnic makeup, cultural heritage, family history, socioeconomic class at birth, or gifts and wir-



ing. But God has His reasons for forming us as He has. "We are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them" (Ephesians 2:10, ESV). We may not have the opportunity to see the direct outcome of our choices or live the life we always dreamed of, but God maps out for us a way to walk in freedom from our expectations of how we think life should unfold, even when our circumstances don't make sense to us. He continually asks us to let go and trust that He will catch us. He invites us to relinquish control in the midst of the unknown, the unanswered questions, the bewildering circumstances, and the sense of being overwhelmed. In this place of surrender, we deepen our intimacy with Him. Our challenge is to relinquish what hinders us from seeking and following His will, wherever it may take us.

A Story of Surrender

One character in the Bible I find both fascinating and inspiring is the orphan Hadassah, whose name is Hebrew for "myrtle." A myrtle is an evergreen shrub or tree with fragrant white flowers. While we are not given much information about Hadassah's childhood, an entire book in the Bible is written about her under her Persian name, Esther.

We will unpack Esther's story in the pages ahead (as well as stories from other folks in Scripture), but here's a brief summary. Esther was adopted and raised by her cousin Mordecai and grew up in Persia, now southwestern Iran, as part of the Jewish remnant that chose to remain in voluntary exile rather than return to their homeland. Her family was exiled in 586 BC when King Nebuchadnezzar destroyed Jerusalem. Forty-seven years later, under the rule of Cyrus the Great of



Persia, Jews were allowed to return to Palestine. Esther's story takes place fifty-six years after their return.

The king at that time, Xerxes, called Ahasuerus in some translations, had a wife who was beautiful but refused to do his bidding. This infuriated him, and after consulting with his advisers, he decided to banish Queen Vashti and replace her with someone more compliant. Xerxes sent out harem scouts to round up young virgin girls for his consideration. This was no volunteer beauty pageant. These young girls, including Esther, were wrenched from their families to become part of the king's collection. Esther pleased the king more than any of the other women, so Xerxes crowned her queen.

We find elsewhere in Scripture examples of God's people living in foreign lands and making God-honoring choices. Joseph was sold into Egyptian slavery yet remained faithful to God (Genesis 39). Daniel and his friends were swept up in the Babylonian exile and chose not to partake in the consumption of food unlawful to them. They refused idol worship and retained their devotion to God at all costs (Daniel 1–3). Though not explicitly stated in the text, it seems Esther's case was different. Her cousin Mordecai instructed her to hide her Jewish roots, and she did so. Esther chose to go along with the surrounding culture and disobeyed several commandments from the Mosaic law. She kept her identity a secret and relied on her outer beauty to keep the king's favor. She lived a life of comfort and privilege, with her foremost aim to please her husband, not her God.

Sometimes God uses a crisis to jolt us out of living for our own protection and comfort. In Esther's case her crisis came when King Xerxes sent forth a decree to annihilate all the Jews living within his kingdom. Esther was a Jewish exile, a woman, married to the king,



with access to leaders who could determine the fate of her people's lives. However, Persian laws set in place to protect the king from assassination attempts made approaching him without being summoned punishable by death. Esther had a life-and-death decision to make.

We see the evidence of her surrendered heart when, after much fasting and prayer, she decided to approach the king unannounced and accept the outcome, good or bad. "If I perish, I perish," she declared (Esther 4:16). Esther recognized her unique role at this particular time in history and acknowledged that her life belonged entirely to God.

In this posture, with her hands open to the one true King, Esther yielded her will and allowed God to give or take as He saw fit. God's great purposes were unleashed as Esther let go of her one-dimensional, skin-deep existence. She rose up as a leader who wisely, shrewdly, boldly risked her life in behalf of her people. Through Esther the Jewish people were delivered; even people living in Persia became followers of her God (8:17). Esther's example revealed her dependence on the Lord and demonstrated how God works in mysterious ways to change the hearts of kings (Proverbs 21:1).

A Willing Heart

Having a willing heart like Esther's and Florence's requires that we pursue a relationship with God above all others. Following Jesus isn't so much a decision to live a particular lifestyle with stringent rules as it is a decision to live in relationship *with* Him and allow Him to lead, guide, provide, and sustain. In Florence's words, "Surrender. Let God be God."



Throughout the rest of this book, we will delve into what this might look like in our lives and what gets in the way. Sometimes having a willing heart means that we release our tight grip on what we think will give us security; our open hands then become conduits for God to bless and redirect resources as needed. Our willing hearts overcome apathy and let go of entitlement, refusing to settle for anything less than what God wants for us. Our willing hearts depend on God rather than on our limited resources. Our willing hearts learn the rhythms of restorative rest and avoid burnout. Our willing hearts extend forgiveness to others as we walk in the forgiveness we receive in Christ. Our willing hearts trust that God's timing is perfect and that the times when He tells us no or to wait are never haphazard or cruel. Our willing hearts serve by faith, often not knowing what will be the outcome of our sacrifices and choices. Our willing hearts move toward others with different backgrounds and experiences. Our willing hearts receive the spiritual nourishment that only Christ can provide. And our willing hearts walk by faith through the doors God opens and follow whatever path He lays out, even if it looks nothing like what we planned.

But where do we start to align ourselves more closely with God's will? How do we surrender our wills if they are at odds with God's? Believing that the center of God's will is the best place to be is one thing; living out that belief in our daily lives is another.

A few years ago, on a flight leaving my home airport in Southern California, I sat next to a man who kept looking out the window of the plane with more than usual interest. As we got acquainted, I learned that he piloted smaller planes as a hobby and often flew out of our



airport. He shared with me how the runway identifying numbers need to be adjusted as the earth's magnetic poles gradually shift over time. The compass the airplanes use always points to magnetic north, but the numbers no longer accurately reflect the magnetic heading of the runways as the magnetic poles change position.

The same shifting is true of us. Our hearts need regular recalibration to stay in line with God's will. We become recalibrated as we lift our eyes off self and circumstances and turn our attention wholly to God. Letting go of whatever "trapeze" we might be holding on to requires trust. Not trust in ourselves; not trust in particular outcomes; but trust in the One who loves us and promises to catch us.

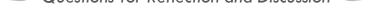
Yes, living with a willing heart can take us down painful roads. Sometimes our pain is the result of our poor choices. Other times the poor choices of others affect our lives. Sometimes no clear correlation exists, and we are confused and bewildered. While God may allow sickness, pain, and death for purposes we don't always understand, He never abandons us in our sorrow. He never lies or forgets or lashes out. He is not ego driven or insecure or power hungry. He is good. He is near. His love is tender and fierce.

I imagine God scanning the earth, spotting young Florence in the middle of western Uganda as she lifted up to heaven her surrendered heart, and smiling in delight, knowing the plans He had already laid out for her. God sees each of us as well, and He knows our hearts. Those whose hearts belong wholly to Him have His strong support.

As I looked across the grounds of the Dream Center and back at Florence that day, I kept thinking, *Look what happened when she opened her hands*.







- What part of Florence's story most challenges or inspires you?
- 2. Have you experienced a time when you were challenged to have "crazy faith"? If so, what did you learn from that experience?
- 3. Describe a time when God prompted you to give or let go of something you were reluctant to relinquish. If you were able to let go, what was the outcome?
- 4. How would you describe the posture of your heart at this time in your life? What are some things you clutch or try to control that might be preventing you from letting go of the "trapeze"?
- 5. Consider my statement "Each time I've placed my heart, life, plans, hopes, and dreams into the hands of my loving, good, strong, faithful, able, and all-knowing God, it has simultaneously been easier and harder." In what ways has this been true for you?



- 6. Has God ever used a crisis to jolt you out of living for your own protection and comfort, as He did with Esther? If so, describe the experience and what you learned about yourself and God through it.
- 7. What similarities can you see between yourself and Esther? Discuss a time when you had to make a hard choice to follow God's plan for your life.
- 8. Is there an area of your life right now that feels at odds with God's will for you? If so, ask God to better align your heart posture with His purposes for you. Commit to reading and studying this book to learn how to live with open hands, fully surrendered to Him.

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