

The Middle Matters

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**LISA-JO
BAKER**

**BEST-SELLING AUTHOR
OF NEVER UNFRIENDED**

**Why That
(Extra)Ordinary
Life Looks Really
Good on You**



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This book is for my mom, Jo Rous.



*We lost her in the middle. But not before she taught me
that the harder the moment, the greater the story.*

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Welcome to the Middle!

nce upon a time, I had no idea what a muffin top was. That time, my friend, has long passed. I'm in my forties now, and me and my muffin top—that chubby little bulge of tummy that refuses to stay tucked away behind the top button of my jeans but insists on grinning around at the world over the top of my waistband—are on the closest of terms. Maybe more so than I would like.

It is one of the landmarks of my middle. Literally. And metaphorically. Because when I bump up against that chunky midsection that I'm trying to accept, it's with the same surprise I feel late at night after I've exhausted another day of being in charge of my own life and the lives of all these people who live in our house, plus the cats.

I keep waiting to feel like a grown-up while going through all the grown-up motions. I'm not sure if these are the things you're supposed to say out loud. But isn't it weird to have all the responsibilities of a grown-up and look like a grown-up and have a grown-up job and a grown-up mortgage and still not be sure how or when to change the air filters?

It's a shock to find myself here in the middle. I'm pretty much at the

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halfway point of my life. What on earth? In true muffin-top character, it is not glamorous. This middle is mostly the part where it's easy to pass by without slowing down long enough to pay attention. You just want to tuck that chubby midsection into your pants, drape a flowy shirt over it, and call it "good enough." You know what I'm talking about, yes? What this middle, muffin-top stage of life looks like?

Maybe like me you've now lived longer with your man than without, and that's insane. Because when you were eighteen, maybe you also swore you'd never be anyone's wife or mother, and now he knows every nook, cranny, and (let's face it) pockmark of your "wonderland." And you are a reluctant connoisseur when it comes to the entire range of his nightly snore repertoire. You both wear glasses and secretly enjoy going to Costco. Your kids are toddling into middle school or high school instead of just around your living room. And while on the outside you look like a grown-up, your inside self is still frozen in time at your favorite age, but you no longer recognize the tween celebrities featured on magazines at the checkout aisle.

Instead, you leaf through the home decor mags while waiting to pay for the mound of food it now takes to feed your constantly starving tiny humans who are no longer tiny and sometimes walk into the living room, wink, and call you "Woman!" Your kids are human Shazams for all the songs you no longer recognize on the radio, and when you watch movies these days, you're rooting for the parents instead of the angry teens.

There are so many soccer and football and dance practices that you often drive to the wrong location or show up at the wrong time on the wrong day. And maybe there's still one little left in the house who gets schlepped along to all the bigs' sporting events, and you end up feeling bad for her and sometimes for yourself that you both have to be on the

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bleachers so much. None of these are bad things—they're just the pebble stuck in the bottom of your shoe that at first is only annoying but on the hard days makes you want to throw that shoe across the room.

Welcome to the middle!

Normal feels all stretched out and squidgy around the edges when you're splitting time and to-dos, yet it's the stuff of life and marriage and kids and work that everyone lives. And now there's also the reality of retirement as more than just that infomercial you used to fast-forward through but also something you will actually need in the no-longer-distant future. And there's the no-less-essential investment of fighting for time to keep dating the man you're raising kids with so you feel like a couple and not just a couple of people running a summer camp together.

Add to that the more mundane (but still significant) figuring out of new school systems that require you to give five days' advance notice to make a change to the bus schedule and how that complicates organizing playdates for while you're out of town. (Although your kids tell you that you're embarrassing them and "It's not a playdate, Mom; it's called hanging out.") But you're the grown-up, and while this still surprises you, this is the work of grown-ups: organizing the boring details that keep a family chugging along.

This is the stuff of our seasons right now. How we wake up to morning breath and steal quickie Sunday afternoon love and hope we can also squeeze in a just-as-sexy nap. These are the years of driving the curving bends of our neighborhood between school and practices and parent-teacher conferences and games and study sessions and recitals and the gas station and the grocery store, every morning and afternoon and evening and never getting tired of the golden, glorious trees while we often get tired of the driving.

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This is just what we do. We drive and feed and keep breaking our days and our lives wide open. We have winding conversations about sports and pop culture and try to explain Kim Kardashian to our tweens while our middles get squishier. It takes work to keep paying attention, to keep parenting with intention, because there's a lazy side of us that just wants to hit cruise control and sleep in now that our kids are sleeping through the night. Please tell me you know what I'm talking about here?

But the stakes are higher now because our kids can remember our mistakes. Combine that with the side of insanity that comes with finally understanding what work you feel meant and fulfilled to do, while also constantly having to juggle it with the schedules of everyone else who lives in your house, including the pets. I've been giving eye drops six times a day to one of my kids and also one of my cats. What on earth? At night the fish need to be fed, and I never remember to actually go pick the tomatoes we tried to grow in our garden this year.

Over and over and over again.

The middle is the place where our lives really live. This is the place where we have grown into the shapes of our souls even as we might have outgrown the shapes of our jeans.

The middle is the marrow. The glorious ordinary of your life that utterly exhausts you but that you might have finally started to understand in ways you didn't at the beginning. Listen, I'm not asking you to *seize* the day here; I'm just asking you to actually *see* it. Even if just out of the corner of one eye. The middle is worth remembering while you are actually living it, because you won't pass by this way again.

So it's worth slowing down long enough on random afternoons to really look around at your life and your husband and the human beings

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you are raising together and let it sink in that you've grown up and that it's good. You are living at the very center of what will be your story. Right now. Let's stop long enough to read a few lines of these lives out loud. Because trust me when I tell you, sister, the middle is worth reading.

The middle is ridiculous and terrible, so funny and so much fun, and also so exhausting. But it's the stuff of the stories our kids will one day tell about us. These are the days of miracle and wonder. The stories we will one day tell each other as we laugh at all those times we spent all those hours carpooling kids all over the planet of our neighborhood. These are the stories that will line our empty nests one day. We are living the memories that will be passed down to the ones who are still living their beginnings. The middle is the gift you didn't know you were right in the middle of, friend.

Seriously.

Let's relish the middle. Let's savor the middle. Let's embrace the middle in all its mundane glory. Because maybe the middle isn't so bad. Maybe we don't want to hide it, ignore it, or miss it. Sister, maybe the middle is the part where it really starts to get good!

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Part 1

Why the Middle of Your Muffin Top Matters

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Your Age Is Not a Dirty Word

nce upon a time, I bought a pair of jeans in Prague and they were gorgeous. It was the year before I became a mother. I bought them in a store that was just a stone's throw from the Charles Bridge, and they fit in ways that made Pete and I feel like newlyweds on honeymoon all over again—but better, as we were five years into our marriage and so much better acquainted with each other's moods and bodies than when we were still fumbling our way forward that first year.

Those jeans could tell stories of late nights in expat restaurants ordering onion rings in a country where the word *calories* is foreign and it would never have occurred to me to consider them. Of an afternoon watching *Cats*, an evening at the opera when I briefly ditched the jeans for dressing up, a long walk along the skyline. Those jeans. Those jeans could tell stories on me. And more and more they tell the story of what it means to say goodbye to that shape and that version of myself. Not because there's a perfect size; there's just an irreversible change in the set of the hips, the heart, the fit post-college, post-twenties, post-newlywed, post-new mom, post-thirties and forties, and that's okay. I'm mostly okay with it.

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In the mornings now, there are kids clamoring for breakfast, and my eyes are blurry without contacts as I dig into my closet for comfort and bring out a pair of dark-blue denim that is a friendly fit. And my youngest walks over and rubs her cheek against one leg. A teen boy wants cake for breakfast. And I'm more likely wearing my Converse sneakers than my heels.

But my waist can tell stories now bigger and grander than the view from the Charles Bridge in Prague.

I am a life maker, grower of tiny humans, raiser of sons and daughter. I fit into myself better than I ever fit into my Prague jeans. I fit into this house and this family and this story we're living of less newbie parents who still find they enjoy waking up beside kids who some nights have still pretzeled themselves in between us even though they really are too big for that now.

My years made this moment possible. Every single year with all its wild joys and desperate despairs. People are often surprised when I comfortably admit how old I am. And I'm surprised at their surprise. Since when is sharing our age an act of courage? Every single one of these forty-four years has been hard earned. I am proud of them. The older I get, the more I like this woman in this skin. With these hips and these tired eyes and crooked smile and stretch marks and wisdom.

Yes, I'm older.

My middle son thinks it's incomprehensible that I'm in my forties. He likes to ask me over and over again and then shake his head in awe, muttering under his breath, "I thought you were only thirty! Wow, forties!" But I find I fit into this woman's skin better than I did a year ago, and so much better than a decade ago. I am becoming the surest version of myself. I feel it in my heart. Sometimes I feel it in my tired feet, too. But those simply tell me I've been busy. Busy with work and sometimes

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jogging, more often hauling groceries between the car and the house and carpooling children and walking the length of soccer fields or football fields or the streets of DC with throngs of commuters or relatives in town who want to see the sites, and it is a soulful kind of busy.

I am not afraid anymore of who I will grow up to be—dressed up on Sunday mornings or wound down on Friday nights. I feel the wrinkles climbing happy around my eyes and my cheeks, a testimony to laughter and life. I feel so full of the wonder of being alive. Even on the days I am tired or frustrated or desperate for an hour to myself. I am aware that the God who made me gave me purpose and loves me, not because of what I do, what I weigh, or how I look, but because of who I am, and this is a miracle to me.

My Father God was there during the years of sleep deprivation, and He's still here walking beside me as I keep stubbing my toes on this new season of teenage years. This shift from carrying my kids on the curve of my hip to carrying them deep in the ache of my heart. These strange new years of discovering a fascinating new world that I've arrived in without the instructions or tools I'll need to make sense of it. The tools I'll need to coax my huge boys into sharing their thoughts and dreams with me the way they used to share their Lego creations. This is new. This is good. This is crazy intimidating.

Pete and I are stumbling our way forward and becoming surer in our dreams and work and still get the urge to dash out at 8:30 p.m., after taking the long commute home, to go buy cinnamon breadsticks. It's not just indulgence. Sometimes after a long day of negotiating project deadlines and tween arguments, it's a matter of survival.

This is older. This is better. This is good.

And I know I've made my peace with this time and place when I put on my jeans and care more about their comfort than their size.

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These jeans have been on a journey with me and have seen the rise and fall of hips and belly as I carried three babies. I doubt men have closets full of clothes in such a unique array of sizes. But they haven't worn their children on the inside either.

My mom was two years younger than I am now when she died. I remember thinking she was so old. But now, of course, I know better. She was as young as everybody said she was. She had so much living still to do. But she was also satisfied—a woman who ate her life in enthusiastic chunks of joy and roars of laughter and long conversations over many cups of hot tea until she was full up on a full life filled with stories. So I will never be embarrassed by my years.

If I can offer anything I've learned, any mistakes, any scars, any wrinkles of wisdom to the women coming behind me, I will do so. And if letting them know exactly how old I am helps them hear me better, believe me better, or take any of my own experiences to heart, then it was worth it. It is always worth it to be the truest version of ourselves. *Because* of our ages, our sizes, our shapes, our stories.

At night I sit in the bathroom on the closed toilet lid as my youngest, my first grader, takes a bath. And I talk to her about beauty. I point out the parts of her pruney self that she's the most self-conscious about, and we name them beautiful. We talk about round growing bellies that remind us of acorns, packed with all the potential to grow into giant oak trees. This is beauty, I tell her. This belly of yours loves you because it offers you life and length and growth and height, all stored up in there waiting for the right season. She reaches up from the tub and wraps her arms around my neck and we sit there beside the floating dolls that bear witness to this truth, and it's quiet except for the dripping tap.

There are books and blog posts and news articles that I comb through in the dark hours while my daughter sleeps. They say that girls

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need to hear that they are brave and strong and capable. That their bodies are purposeful more than they are beautiful.

I don't doubt that's true.

But my daughter is fast asleep in the room next door, wrapped around by the pink and white and wildly frilly tutu she wouldn't take off before bed.

And I imagine there's something to that, too.

And last year when we were packing up suitcases for our flight to South Africa and Christmas with the family we hadn't seen in two years, I threw in six princess dresses at the last minute. They were folded up so small and light and fragile into the nooks and crannies of space between our everyday essentials that you'd hardly notice them.

On impulse, I packed a blue Cinderella and a yellow Belle and a white Barbie princess gown. A seafoam-green Ariel dress and a Snow White gown and a bright pink tutu. Part of my brain thought it ridiculous. But I had this other feeling that there may be princesses in need of dresses. The thing about beauty is that it's always there; it just looks different for each of us. But it's always there, waiting to be called out. A grown-up friend wrote me, "I want to be told that I'm beautiful, too."

Behind our glasses and insecurities, behind our unruly bangs and business suits or yoga pants, behind our accomplishments and husbands and kids, there is always the little girl who wants to be told she's beautiful.

I know this because I see her in the mirror.

I ignored her for years. But I'm learning she needs to be taken seriously. Having a daughter is teaching me that. As seriously as I take her brain and her athleticism and her kindness. As seriously as I take her passions and ideas and hurts, I need to take this part of us that is called

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beauty. Even though I've spent years pretending she doesn't exist. This part of me that embarrasses me, the part that wants nothing to do with Barbies and defines herself by her brain and not her looks. This part of me that longs to be named beautiful.

Because I remember all the ways I did not and was not when I was a young girl. Or when I was a speaker at a conference last week.

She has thin, straggly hair. Her ears stick out.

These are labels I have accepted about myself since I was a teenager because a too-hip-for-his-age hairdresser once whispered them to my mom while he was cutting my hair. As if they were a shameful secret. As if I should apologize for ears that got in the way of his scissors. Do you know what I mean? Do you have a memory, a throwaway sentence, an insult, a note, a casual, cutting observation that you tucked into your soul and allowed to grow up alongside you as if it were always part of you? So that now that lie is grafted into your DNA and you can't tell the difference between the label and the reality of you?

I remember how my cheeks burned. How for years afterward I felt embarrassed anytime a hairdresser came to be trimming in the vicinity. How I imagined they must be appalled by my big and sticky-out ears. How that tiny seed of an insult had grown into a definition that I allowed to define me. How easily I slipped into the habit of apologizing for my appearance even if I spoke the defeated words only inside my own head.

He named me unbeautiful, and I believed him.

I wonder what would have happened if my mother had voiced a response to the sentence that slipped so carelessly from that hairdresser all those years ago. I wonder, with all of life's long lists of busyness, if moments like those even qualify for taking the time to respond. For leaning in and telling strangers who casually pin unhelpful words to

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parts of our bodies that we will, in fact, not be accepting those labels today, thank you very much. That we choose instead to name our girls and ourselves—and, yes, even our thighs and ears and waists and hair and scars—with the words spoken on the sixth day of creation, “*very good*” (Genesis 1:31).

And then one afternoon, decades later in South Africa, we have a princess party for our daughters—some adopted, some fostered, some born from our hips—and I see in each of their wide eyes and longing looks at the mirror that beauty loves to be called out, to be named and cherished and recognized by her mother.

Our daughters will see themselves as beautiful in our eyes first. If we let them. And once they’ve seen themselves as beautiful in the eyes of their mothers, maybe they’ll be braver dancing through the mine-fields of what the movies and magazines scream is desirable.

On a whim, the moms dress up too. The only princess dresses that fit us are the ones from our weddings. I haven’t worn mine since my wedding, and it won’t zip up all the way in the back. But I step into it anyway and see my own wild hopes echoed in five pairs of eyes. I see that beauty is more than a dress size and, at the same time, never less than princess size. I see that God looks at our insides but also made our unique outsides and that maybe we need to stop making false divides.

And I feel how I am wired to feel beautiful as five sets of small arms wrap tightly around my neck, and I believe the promise that the future holds love stories for each of us.

Daughters lost and found, abandoned, beloved, adopted.

Daughters named.

Daughters in all different shades, accents, languages.

Daughters celebrated.

Daughters *beautiful*.

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And the word might not always fit us. It might feel as if it's too tight or sticking in back like my wedding dress that gaped open with a disgruntled zipper that couldn't quite contain the twenty years since I last wore it. But it doesn't matter. It doesn't matter that I've outgrown that dress, because you can't ever outgrow the beauty of being loved.

And when my mini-me, my little girl, takes my veil and wraps it around herself like a hug, eyes looking up at me from under layers of lace, I see my past, present, and future all cupped in that single moment in the hands of the God who declares us all beautiful: "He has made *everything* beautiful in its time" (Ecclesiastes 3:11).

That means you and me and our years, our hurts and unhappy endings. Everything is beautiful when reflected in the eyes of the God who names us so. Beauty—like so much grace, so much hope, so many promises—is in the eye of the faithful, heavenly beholder. But it's okay to doubt. It's okay to wonder. It's okay to ask the question out loud, sister. Even if the only person who hears it is the one who made you beautiful in the first place. But, hear me; hear *Him* when He says that you *are* beloved and wildly beautiful.

From your cracked, tired heels to your fingers all wrinkled from dishwater and diapers changed in the dark. From your brain bursting with curiosity and creativity and entrepreneurship and equations to your hair that you wish was curlier, straighter, thicker, thinner.

That mole, that wrinkle, those jeans that don't fit like they used to on that set of hips. Those tired eyes, those strong arms, that crooked grin, that brilliant mind.

That brave mouth that speaks up for children, for women, for anyone who can't speak for themselves. Those feet that run hard after a God who has called you.

Those aching muscles, that broken heart, that doubting faith.

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Every freckle.

Every laugh line.

Every stretch mark.

Every wrinkle.

Every year.

That waist that deserves your grace.

Yes, even that belly, all soft with the memory of life.

Especially that.

Every inside *and* every outside.

You. Are. Beautiful.

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The Scale Is Not the Boss of You

*M*y dad was turning seventy, so our family was making the trek to South Africa from Baltimore to Johannesburg via Detroit and Amsterdam. To be back with my people. The people who were my first home.

We were ordering gifts and getting new suitcases and planning all the family we wanted to see. But deep down I was wasting my anticipation because I was drowning in self-conscious worry. Worry I wished I could turn off like the dripping faucet it was.

Here's the thing—just one summer earlier I was at the healthiest, fittest weight I'd been in years. Then I faced some crushing work deadlines and mainlined candy corn, cotton candy, carbs, and other assorted forms of sugar to push myself through.

There are things a forty-plus-year-old body does not recover from quickly. Or even slowly. Heavy, sustained sugar and carb intake combined with zero exercise is one of them. No matter that I panic-joined a gym and actually went several times a week. No matter that I cut out the late-night binging on French bread and Brie cheese.

Let's just pause here to take a moment to celebrate the gift that is Brie cheese.

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One of my favorite food memories of all time involved Brie cheese and Kyiv, Ukraine. A friend and I discovered a fancy, hoity-toity deli one afternoon in downtown Kyiv and lost our minds when we saw the bread and cheese selection. We bought it by the basketful. And because we couldn't restrain ourselves and suffer the commute home before we dug in, we stood on the sidewalk at a busy intersection waiting for a taxi while shoving huge chunks of warm bread covered in ripped-off gobs of gooey cheese into our eager mouths. And washing it all down with Coke straight from the bottle. That street corner and that Brie baguette sandwich in the spring sunshine was pure culinary heaven.

Flash-forward to present time. Because I'd spent months reliving those memories at a much more advanced age—no matter that I was really, really trying—the scale was still depressingly stubborn every morning I stepped onto it. And I felt my heart sink with every pound I hadn't lost yet. My days filled up with self-beratement about my lack of discipline and why couldn't I survive on less calories and why do I love food so much?

You see, I'm a joy eater. The happier I am, the more I want to indulge. Food feels like happiness to me. It's like a hug from the inside. Give me family anxiety or rocky relationships or hard conversations or kid drama and I lose all appetite. But give me new friends or coffee dates or a house full of guests and I will break out the dips and chips and well-loved Crockpot and Joanna Gaines's banana bread and delight the night away.

Better yet, combine my two favorite things—a dear friend and her kitchen—and I will bliss out entirely. Serve me up heartfelt conversation alongside homemade biscuits and I could easily kill a decade of time like that.

I sat in Wendy's tiny kitchen in Kyiv as she coaxed kefir into but-

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termilk so she could make southern biscuits from scratch in a country that didn't sell them. Her oven warmed the room, the conversation warmed my soul, and the biscuits filled up all the empty places that homesickness had eaten away.

I sat in Christie's farmhouse kitchen in Pennsylvania and she shrugged and told me lunch wouldn't be much and then cut into crusty French baguettes and tossed Greek salad with its shiny black olives and tart onions with her homemade vinaigrette and I sat on her kitchen stool for hours feeding my belly and my heart.

My mother was a terrible cook but a gifted curator of conversations, people, and comfort food. These are my happy places. So when I'm happy I go there. Over and over. Without discipline or restraint. And in my forties I have discovered that that kind of happiness takes a toll on my middle. Well, on my middle, my thighs, and my double chin, too, apparently.

So while the kitchen was my confidant, the scale became an angry voice in my head. A voice that despised my thighs and my belly and spoke ruthless criticism at both. And I listened. And tried really hard to obey.

And it sucked the life and marrow out of this long-anticipated trip home.

Then one Thursday I woke up and decided I was tired of it.

I got on the phone with my dad and fessed up. I told him just how tired I was of feeling tired of worrying about my weight. I said, "Well, Dad, we're coming home chubbier than we would have liked, and we're hoping you guys will just take us as we are."

My dad. My dad who was turning seventy and is a fantastically health-conscious doctor and runs five miles a couple of times a week

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and is raising adopted kids the same age as mine while still consulting hundreds of patients a week and who probably never binge-ate anything in his life.

My dad.

But the guilt and judgment never came.

Instead, I could feel the love unfurling across the miles of phone lines and into my ear as he said, “We’ll love you just the way you are. And we hope when you’re home, you’ll let us add on a few more pounds for good measure, of all the foods here that we know you miss!”

I was so surprised, a belly laugh bubbled up out of me. I was surprised by the joy that so easily eclipsed the worry and burst out into laughter. I cradled the phone against my ear and it was like being home already.

Listen, this isn’t about food or weight. Well, it is in the sense that healthy matters and great company is just as great with way less carbs. That’s all true. And moving our bodies matters because they thrive with exercise and it gets every part of us firing on all cylinders. I get that. I hear you preaching the importance of healthy food and consistent exercise—I really truly do—and I will keep at it.

But it’s also about much more than that. Really. It’s about that old love story. It’s about believing that you are unconditionally loved. No, it’s more than that. It’s about *knowing* that you are unconditionally loved no matter what you look like, weigh in at, sound like, talk like, think like.

Do you know what that means? Beyond the cliché that we are so good at brushing off? Let me spell it out for you the way I had to spell it out for myself:

Unconditional love = you are loved, no matter what.

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No matter what the scale says or your performance review says or your passive-aggressive relationship says or your bathing suit says or the voice in your head says.

You are loved beyond pounds or fit or style or perfection.

You are loved because *you are*.

Period. End of story.

You are loved because you were created by a God who *is* love.

You are loved because love is the DNA of the stuff you were made from.

You are loved because love is the blood that runs in your veins and the sway of your hips and, yes, even the rub of your upper thighs against each other—love, love, love, left, right, left, right, swish, swish, love, love, love. Even in the sticky sweat of summer in places you wish weren't sweating.

You are loved because love is what pumps in your veins like a drum-beat reminder that this is your name and there is no other name than love, love, love.

Somehow between the scale and my favorite jeans that don't fit this summer, I forgot that. My daughter was stroking my belly this morning and whispered into its curves, "I love this belly." And my dad said the same thing using different words on the phone this morning. And my husband said it when he called to say he missed me while he's traveling this week.

This throbbing harmony of how loved we are. If only we would listen. If only we would stop listening to our measuring sticks and scales, these voices that we need to quit, and start listening to our promises. For God Himself says, "I will never leave you or abandon you" (Hebrews 13:5, CSB).

Don't get me wrong—I will continue on this journey to be healthy

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for my kids and for the calling God has entrusted to me. I will practice curbing my sugar cravings and leaning into better choices in my fridge and in my heart. I will keep moving my body and reminding my muscles that they are made for more than sitting behind a computer all day.

But at the same time, I will leave behind the voices that are robbing me of the joy of that journey. Don't ever let the scale tell you different.

And I will practice being loved, more than I practice being careful what I eat.

And next week I will fly home to my South African people and revel in rusks and pancakes and boerewors and pap and koeksisters and a whole host of foods that taste like home. And I will not consult the scale for its opinion.

I will look into the eyes of my family and let them have the last word, because I already know what my Father says: "I have loved you with an everlasting love; I have drawn you with unfailing kindness" (Jeremiah 31:3).

And before I step onto a scale, I will repeat those words out loud and let them, and only them, be the weight that defines me.

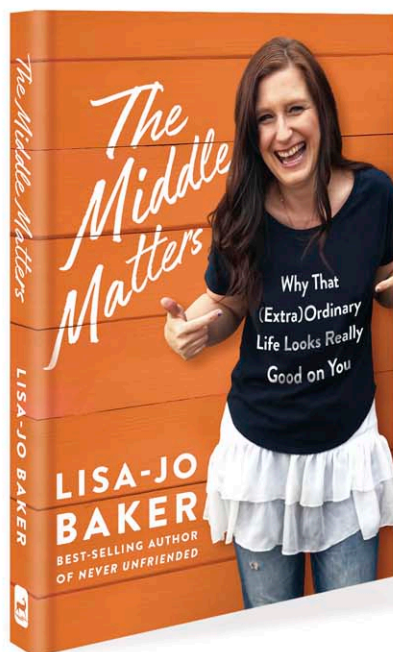
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