

"Raw, relatable, and encouraging."
—*New York Times* bestselling author Granger Smith

**Conquer Yesterday's Regrets,
Ditch Tomorrow's Worries, and
Thrive Right Where You Are**

Single Today

Ryan Wekenman



**SNEAK
PEEK**

SAMPLE ONLY

Praise for *Single Today*

“*Single Today* is a brave and stirring look into the deep waters of the human heart. It asks probing questions and explores underlying pressures of marital expectations from the church and society. We are led by the thoughtful and vulnerable reflections of Wekenman’s own journey, as he lays his heart to bear. And what he models for us is vulnerability, integrity, and deep understanding. Yes, this is a book about being single, but it is even more about being truly present and soaking up every bit of beauty that the past and the future might otherwise steal. Ryan says he is good at being single, but the truth is, Ryan is good at living well, and this book invites us all to do the same.”

—JEFFREY TACKLIND, author of *The Winding Path of Transformation*, and pastor of
Little Church by the Sea, Laguna Beach

“Wekenman’s vulnerability and openness exemplify that this was a book and a message that he *had* to write—not because he wanted to but out of a deep desire for himself and others to feel less alone in their unique callings in life. *Single Today* will be an encouragement to many who need to know that they are unique, gifted, valued, and loved.”

—BEN HIGGINS, co-founder and president of
Generous International and author of *Alone in Plain Sight*

“I’ve been a mentor for single women for more than a decade, and I wish I had this practical resource to share with them sooner! It’s funny, warm, and encouraging, and it reads like you’re having coffee with a good friend who also happens to be one of the wisest people you know. *Single Today* will change the way you see your past and your future, your singleness and yourself.”

—STEPHANIE MAY WILSON, author of *Create a Life You Love*

“*Single Today* offers a vision for a fully satisfied life sans the need to be tethered relationally in marriage. It is the book every single person needs to read and every married person needs to read to better equip their single friends and family members to live the full lives God calls them to.”

—WAYNE FRANCIS, lead pastor of The Life Church, New York;
co-author of *God and Race*; and chaplain for
the Brooklyn Nets

“Such a helpful guide for anyone struggling with contentment right now. I loved Wekenman’s insight and stories that anyone can relate to, whether single, dating, engaged, or married.”

—RUTH SOUKUP, *New York Times* bestselling author of
Living Well, Spending Less and *Do It Scared*

“Wekenman clearly and brilliantly helps his readers learn to appreciate their single stage of life—not to reluctantly embrace it but to thrive in it and even be thankful for it! Singleness doesn’t need to be a valley in life you must endure until you find that other person, but instead it can be a nonstop collection of mountaintop moments, inspired by God for your life, that you can be absolutely grateful for!”

—SHAWN JOHNSON, senior pastor of Red Rocks Church
and author of *Attacking Anxiety*

“Wekenman shares from a deep place of knowing and understanding the experience and challenges faced by singles, whether they are feeling stuck, struggling with being single again, or loving it. Brilliantly written, this timely, inspiring, and biblically based work is full of practical application that will move readers to a place of true contentment in the season they are in.”

—JIMMY AND IRENE ROLLINS, founders of
TWO=ONE marriage ministry

“This book is packed with immediately practical real talk about contentment, purpose, and living presently through singleness, regardless of the reason or the season. *Single Today* is raw, relatable, and encouraging. It’s the real deal.”

—GRANGER SMITH, speaker and *New York Times* bestselling author of *Like a River*

“Wekenman’s authenticity in *Single Today* will be a refreshing reminder of God’s purpose for you in this season. The stereotypical eye-roll moments of singlehood are replaced with engaging stories of wrestling, hope, and wondering what more God has. Wekenman gives practical steps toward significant mindset shifts that lead to a deep satisfaction in being single today.”

—JONATHAN POKLUDA, lead pastor, bestselling author, and host of *Becoming Something* podcast

Single Today

Conquer Yesterday's Regrets,
Ditch Tomorrow's Worries, and
Thrive Right Where You Are

RYAN WEKENMAN



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To my future spouse (jk, lol)

Do not worry about tomorrow.

—Jesus

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Introduction

Two Enemies of Singleness

Everyone is single at some point.

The young woman who has never been asked on a date.

The middle-aged man who gets blindsided by divorce.

The widow waking up in her bed by herself for the first time in decades.

Some hate it; others love it.

Some expect it; others get caught off guard by it.

Some are single intentionally; others are single reluctantly.

Some are single for a season; others are single for a reason.

Singleness is an old friend to some and an unexpected guest to others.

I suppose I'm somewhere in between the two. I've been single all thirty-four years of my life—longer than some, not nearly as long as others. I love being single. I love it so much that I want to be single the rest of my life.

That last sentence is completely true 82 percent of the time.¹

That's how I feel most hours of the day. But then there are other times. The nights I push my introversion to the limit and start feeling lonely, questioning if singleness is really what I want. Or the times I hang out with my niece and nephew and drive home wondering if I really want to miss out on having a family of my

own. Or the moments I meet a couple who has been married for so long that they have that different kind of love—the kind that can be built only out of years of trust—and realize I'd miss out on experiencing that.

Saying yes to singleness means saying no to a lot of beautiful things about life. You can't say yes to the 82 percent without saying no to the 18 percent.

And then we need to consider the deeper layers of this topic. Like how some people have desired to be married since they were young but, decades later, still aren't.

Maybe that's you, and you picked up this book because you're frustrated (or should I say downright irritated?) with singleness. You want to get married, and you've put in the work. You know what you want and have made your list, checked it twice, prayed, even tried fasting that one time, and still nothing. You keep working on yourself, only to find out that no one else seems to be doing the same, so now the whole topic just makes your blood boil.

Maybe you're reading this book because you feel stuck. When you're in a relationship, you want to be single, and when you're single, you want to be in a relationship. You don't know how to move forward, yet you feel the deep despair of loneliness when you're by yourself and start asking all those existential questions about life and love and whether or not there's any purpose to any of this if you don't have a partner.

Maybe you picked up this book because you're single again for the first time in a long time, and the last time you were single, the world looked very different. Now you're trying to find your footing after heartbreak, heartache, or tragedy, and you don't even know where to begin.

No matter what your story is, we all have something in common. Every single person in the world understands that singleness is a struggle. We try to dress it up like it's not, but it is.

But you're not alone. There are billions of us. Billions of single people with billions of questions about billions of challenges.

So I present the questions this book gravitates around: *Is there a solution to all the struggles of singleness? Is there a way to live a full, abundant life on your own? Can you really love life without a love life?*

The simple answer is yes.

But simple doesn't mean easy.

We can't just ignore all the struggles and hope they go away.

Instead, we must come face-to-face with them.

This book is my attempt to organize those billions of struggles into two categories.

Over the years, I've noticed a pattern. After hundreds of pastoral meetings with other single people, I eventually realized that just about every battle, fear, and insecurity single people deal with is caused by one of two things—what I call the two enemies of singleness:

Enemy 1: yesterday (shame, regret, or sorrow about the past)

Enemy 2: tomorrow (fear about the future)

Yesterday keeps us stuck replaying mistakes instead of moving forward. Second-guessing decisions from the past instead of focusing on the ones in front of us. Ruminating on betrayal or rejection, copying those experiences and pasting them onto new people we meet, and remaining closed off to new opportunities. *Will this pain ever go away? Am I broken beyond repair? Am I doomed to repeat the same mistakes?*

And then tomorrow makes us worry. (That's true for everyone, but when you're single, the future has some extra ammo to harass you with.) *Am I running out of time? Will all the good ones be taken? If all my friends get married but I stay single, will our friendships change? What about kids? Am I missing my opportunity to have a family?* Throw in a healthy dose of parental and societal pressure to fit a certain mold in a certain timeline, and it feels impossible to take a breath and be present today.

Yesterday pins us to the floor while tomorrow beats us up—the two make a deadly combo. As you're about to find out, that's my story. I've had plenty of bouts with the two enemies of singleness, and they used to win every fight. But they don't anymore. They still attack, but I have the tools I need to fight back. This book is going to equip you to do the same.

In part 1, we'll learn how to confront the first enemy—yesterday. The pain from the past that keeps us stuck isn't permanent. We aren't doomed to spend the rest of our lives ruminating. We can heal, forgive, and leave yesterday in the past.

In part 2, we'll take on the second enemy—tomorrow. *Surrender* is one of those words we throw around a lot in church, but it's easier to preach than practice, especially when you're single. We're going to practice it together.

Finally, part 3 is about today. The goal is not just to face the two enemies of singleness but also to experience the abundant life on the other side—to tap into the potential that today is teeming with.

At the end of each part, there's an interlude about Mary of Bethany. Mary is a beautiful character in the Bible who had three fascinating interactions with Jesus, each illustrating one of the parts of this book well. I could be wrong, but since there's no mention in Scripture of Mary having a husband or kids, I think that's a

strong indication that she was single at the time. Whatever the reason for her singleness, I assume she was asking a lot of the same questions we are. As her story unfolds, my hope is you'll begin to see your story in hers.

Whether you end up being single for two more days, two more decades, or the rest of your life, this book is for you. Your singleness is an incredible gift; you just have to put in some work to enjoy it. Along the way, you may meet someone who has been putting in the same work, and it may lead to an amazing relationship. Or you may not. That's the beauty of this book: It's about finding the type of contentment that doesn't require anyone else.

As we go along, I'm going to share my story as a single pastor trying (and sometimes failing) to live it well. I'm not good at much, but I am good at being single. The best way I can help you on your path is to share the beautifully difficult journey I went on (and am still going on) to thrive as a single person today.

Ultimately, this is a book about today. It's about surrendering your future and learning to see this present moment as the gift that it is. The full, abundant life you're searching for is available while you're single. It's time to conquer yesterday's regrets, ditch tomorrow's worries, and be single today.

PART ONE

Yesterday

Forget the former things;
do not dwell on the past.

—Isaiah 43:18

“THE POOL WILL BE CLOSED until further notice.”

That was the extent of the email my homeowners’ association sent me last year—they’ve never been much for small talk. And although I respect a one-sentence note, I’d love for it to be followed with “Don’t worry. We’ll also decrease your monthly payment.” That never happens. Amenities come and go, but fees are forever.

I spend a lot of time at my pool—enough to know the maintenance is done every Friday by a couple who pull up in a white F-150, the bed overflowing with chemicals, gadgets, and all sorts of equipment that helps them keep the water looking and smelling fresh.

I don’t know their names, but let’s call them Jeff and Judy. They add chemicals, check levels, clean filters, and stir the water. Or at least they used to. After we received that notorious email, Jeff and Judy stopped showing up.

For the first week after the notice went out, everything seemed fine. I’d run past the pool and consider jumping the fence and swimming anyway. But around week three, the water had a green tint. After another week, there was algae on the surface. And by the end of the second month, the pool was completely green. It looked and smelled awful, like a swamp.

My HOA taught me a valuable lesson—stagnant water starts to stink. Because when Jeff and Judy stopped showing up to stir the water, the pool began its gradual descent from refreshing to repulsive.

That picture of my pool turning into a swamp is the central metaphor for part 1. Imagine your soul as a body of water, like my pool during good times: clear, clean, refreshing water. That's the state our souls are created for. The problem is, life happens. People pollute it, we ignore it, and it starts to stink.

Ignoring the pain, shame, and insecurities from your past is like my neighborhood ignoring the pool. It seems fine initially, but eventually, the living water becomes a stagnant swamp.

Your soul requires upkeep, and one of the beautiful things about a relationship is you have another person built into your life, keeping the water stirred—a Jeff or Judy, if you will. You have a significant other who is constantly asking you about your day, giving you space to process the good, the bad, and the ugly. And you have a responsibility to do the same for them. They help you get your eyes off yourself and devote your life to someone else, and vice versa. You have a partner in crime. Someone to dream with, build with, and celebrate with along the way. Even when it annoys you, the other person's presence in your life keeps your soul moving forward—it keeps the water stirred.

Marriage has been a beautiful, brilliant, God-breathed design ever since he looked down at Adam in the garden and said, "This guy is hopeless on his own." That's my paraphrase. The actual words were "It is not good for the man to be alone."¹

Not good—even in the middle of paradise.

Adam was in the garden before the Fall, and everything was good—except for one thing. It wasn't good for him to be alone. Because as great as all the animals were, they weren't stirring the water in his soul. And stagnant water starts to stink.

So God created Eve, and marriage, and a beautiful picture of two becoming one and living happily ever after.

Which was great for them. But what about us? What about the single people in the world who don't have another person stirring the water? How do we keep our souls from turning into a stagnant swamp?

That's where we're heading. A relationship isn't a prerequisite for stirring the water. In part 1, we're going to learn how to come face-to-face with the first enemy of singleness: the past. We're going to face the pain, heal the shame, let go of yesterday, and be single today.

Chapter 1

Stagnant Water

Feel Your Feelings and Talk It Out

Is there something wrong with me?

The church parking lot had been buzzing all day, but now it was empty. Another successful Sunday. Another week of being a pastor. The sermon was done, the building was locked, the alarm was set, and all I had to do was get back to my apartment.

But I couldn't move.

For the past hour, my Chevy Cruze had been the only car left in the lot. The keys were in the ignition, but I couldn't put it in drive. I was stuck in my own head, trapped by the spiraling thoughts.

We have thousands of thoughts every day. Most come and go, but some get caught, embedding themselves in our brains, like a drill digging deeper and deeper into the earth.

Ten years ago as I sat frozen in that parking lot, one of those thoughts came.

Is there something wrong with me?

Recycled.
On repeat.
Every day.

At the time, I was a few years into being a pastor and loved it. I was working at a great church, was taking seminary classes at night, and had amazing friends. But there was one problem.

I was single.
A single pastor.

By the way, I'm still a single pastor—a much healthier one, but let's not get ahead of ourselves.

In some Christian traditions, singleness is celebrated, but that wasn't my experience. Although we've got Bible verses that say we should celebrate it, in my circles we've been pretty good at overlooking them. (Don't worry—much more on that later.)

I wasn't all that concerned about my relationship status, but everyone else sure seemed to be. My singleness was the low-hanging fruit in every service. Older guys would find me in the lobby and remind me that marriage is God's idea and that they'd really love to see me married by this time next year. And every well-intentioned aunt and grandmother was hearing from God that I was supposed to meet their niece or neighbor.

Everyone had their own method but the same message. *Time is running out. If you're single today, you should be worried about tomorrow. If you aren't searching for "the one," there must be something wrong with you. After all, you aren't getting any younger.*

The expectation was for me to be married. Or at the very least, single and ready to mingle. After all, we're here to be fruitful and multiply.¹

Which is great.
And biblical.
And important.
And of not much interest to me.

A relationship has never been too high on my priority list. But I didn't know how to say that back then. And every time I tried, the person listening would smile as the words went in one ear and out the other, and then they'd tell me about another friend they wanted me to meet—this one was “super independent,” like me.

For years, the narrative of my singleness hung around. It was the thing in the air. I'd go to work and hear it. Then I'd go to seminary and hear it again. Then during every holiday, I'd see my extended family and they'd complete the trifecta. Three strikes and you're out; you can secondhand smoke a narrative for only so long before it starts affecting you.

I say *you* because it's easier to type than *I*. But the truth is, I was laughing less, dreaming less, and sleeping less. Life was losing its luster. My soul was being buried alive underneath all the worries and confusion about my singleness—each harmless joke or comment was another handful of dirt tossed on the coffin. Until this particular Sunday night—the one that found me sitting in the parking lot—when the coffin felt six feet deep.

I was angry and upset, or at least I wanted to be. Those were the emotions I was searching for, but I couldn't find them, name them, or feel them—I didn't know I was allowed to. I couldn't even cry. I hadn't in several years. So instead, I sat in my car and stared blankly at the night sky.

That may sound a bit dramatic for the start of a book on singleness. Maybe your singleness has never kept you stuck in a parking lot. Or maybe my story feels tame compared with your experience. Whatever your story is, we've all had those moments of isolation when the loneliness sets in. Those are the moments when the first enemy of singleness (the past) can take some really cheap shots at you. Shame, regret, and pain from yesterday start telling you there's something wrong with you today.

What I really needed in that moment was for someone to teach me how to process my past (which may be the same thing you need today). I needed to talk it out. Fortunately, that week, I made one of the most important connections I've ever made.

Spiritual Direction

Bill's office smelled like lavender.

To this day, I've never seen a humidifier work harder than the one in the back corner of his small space. The incessant hum was about to escort me into new territory. The place beneath my conscious thoughts. Beneath the surface of the water, the deep end of my soul.

Once I found enough footing to put my car in drive and leave the church parking lot, I figured I should probably see a counselor. I didn't know how to do that at the time; this was before there were resources everywhere. But after a quick Google search, I found an option called spiritual direction.

Spiritual directors are basically counselors, except they are way more spiritual (that's a joke, sort of). While counselors help us work through situations in our lives and relationships, spiritual directors primarily focus on discerning what God is up to in our lives. While every director is different, sessions usually start with some Bible reading, prayer, and a little silence before you dive in and talk about whatever is going on in your life.

That sounded like a good place to start, so I sent an email to a center down the street, and a few days later, I heard back from a guy named Bill who told me he'd love to help.

I had no idea what to expect. My only experience with counseling was what I'd seen in movies, so I figured I was essentially Matt Damon from *Good Will Hunting* and would scare away the first few victims until I finally found someone who "got" me.

That's not what happened.

Mostly because I wasn't a genius with a troubled past who was running away from my potential. I was just a single pastor who was overthinking my singleness.

The counseling space was small but cozy. Besides a couple of chairs, a side table with a Bible on it was the only other piece of furniture. Bill casually sat down, waving at the other chair, inviting me to join him. He had thick, long, unkempt hair and was wearing the baggiest pants I'd ever seen, matched with an oversize plain black T-shirt and flip-flops. The same uniform he would sport every session over the next several years.

"Coffee?" he asked, raising a Styrofoam cup.

I'd been a pastor long enough to know that deep conversations are more manageable when you're sipping on a hot drink, so I nodded. And although he didn't say anything, I'm confident he noticed my shaky hand when I took the cup, coffee spilling over the top and splashing on the floor. As I would soon discover, despite his laid-back appearance, Bill was always observing. Not in a judgmental way, but rather like a fisherman watching the water patterns, or a comic studying human behavior.

"I picked out a passage for us," Bill said, his voice calm. "I'm going to read it. Then I'll be silent. Whenever you are ready, start talking."

That felt like an odd strategy.

That's it?

I came from a fast-paced pastoral job, where we made quick decisions and had so many people to meet with that we had to keep conversations swift and efficient.

20 Yesterday

But I nodded again, and the room went still.

Really still.

The only sound was the humming of the humidifier lofting lavender into the air. Which I needed because the longer we sat in silence, the louder the events of the day became. Random thoughts kept popping up. As if my brain were taking a last stand, trying to protect me from what waited below the surface.

That budget meeting was brutal.

I have so much to get done before my sermon on Sunday.

Maybe I shouldn't be a pastor.

Is there something wrong with me?

Oh shoot, I forgot to call Andy back.

This whole “inner work” thing was new territory for me. Taking time to feel my feelings and talk to someone about them was outside my comfort zone. I'd gotten really good at encouraging others to do it, but I figured it was time to practice what I preached. As uncomfortable as it was, I knew I needed it, so I took a breath and tried to let the hum usher me into the stillness.

Then Bill opened his Bible to the fifth chapter of John's gospel and began to read a story about the Pool of Bethesda.

The Pool

In first-century Palestine, Jerusalem was the center of religious activity.

Near one of the gates of Jerusalem was a pool aptly named Bethesda (an Aramaic word that means “house of mercy”). There was a belief passed down from generation to generation that this pool was special; it had healing power. Most of the time, the water was stagnant. When the water was stagnant, it was an ordinary pool. But once in a while, an angel would come down from

heaven and stir the water. When that happened, the first person to enter the pool would be healed.²

As you can imagine, everyone who needed physical healing would hang there, waiting for the angel to stir the water, including one guy who had been unable to walk for thirty-eight years. We don't know how long he had been lying by the pool—the text doesn't tell us—but as Bill read the story to me, I couldn't help but speculate a little. Imagine if he had spent most (if not all) thirty-eight years there. Some people probably came and went, checking in whenever they passed by to see if they could get lucky. But I wonder if this man had doubled down on this narrative. If he was so desperate for healing that he laid down his mat and set up shop by the water for decades.

Think about that for a second.

On day one, he was probably full of hope, waiting for his miracle. When it didn't come, he figured day two would be his day.

But then a week went by with no results.

And then a month.

And then a year.

Then two.

Then ten.

At some point, the excitement must've worn off. You can hold on to the hope that tomorrow might be different for only so long. There's a limit to the amount of time you can stare. Stare at the stagnant water long enough, and eventually you lose hope it will ever be stirred.

That may sound like a strange story to you, and I agree. You may be wondering if there was really an angel who flew by to stir the water. So do I. And you're probably doubting that the first person to enter the stirred water truly experienced healing. Fair enough.

But what I do know is that after years of trying the same strategy, hope would be hard to come by.

I pictured the man lying on his mat as his hope turned into doubt, and then eventually, that doubt gave way to apathy. There once was a day when he had believed the water would heal him, but now the water was stagnant.

My heart was speeding up as Bill read.

One of the beautiful things about the Bible is that although it's about other people, sometimes it feels like it speaks directly to us. I pictured myself sitting on my mat by that ancient pool, unable to move. But just like the Bethesda pool, the water in my soul was so stagnant that I was spending my evenings stuck in church parking lots.

That was about to change.

Bill was a master of the craft. He read the passage again, slowing down this time as the man on his mat said, "I have no one to help me into the pool when the water is stirred."³ It's as if he knew what was going on in my soul better than I did.

"That's me," I blurted out before Bill could finish the story.

He stopped.

"Sorry," I said, silently cursing myself for interrupting and wondering if spiritual direction was something you could flunk. "I should let you finish. I've never done this before."

But he put his Bible down and smiled. Then the questions began.

Questions That Stir

“What were you feeling that night in the parking lot?” Bill asked after I told him the reason I’d reached out.

“That’s the thing. . . . I don’t know,” I told him truthfully. “I guess that’s the problem. I just felt numb—still do. My soul feels as stagnant as that pool from the story.”

Intellect has always come much more naturally than emotions.

IQ—I’m doing all right.

EQ (aka emotional intelligence)—not so much.

In school, tests were easy, but navigating hallways and lunch-rooms and social status was a whole different animal.

Bill nodded knowingly. “Numb counts as something,” he said with a smile. (By the way, I’ve always held on to that line. If you’re struggling to feel anything as you read the beginning of this book, remember, numb counts as something. The other emotions will come as we do some of the work in the next few chapters, but in the beginning, let yourself off the hook.)

“Let’s not talk about you, then,” he continued. “You’re a pastor. How do you feel like we handle relationships in the church?”

“Not well,” I said. “I just don’t get it. It feels like everyone else is in on a joke that I don’t understand.”

I meant every word. It was starting to feel like the whole God thing was a front for finding love.

I told him about the number of times I’ve watched someone be totally invested in their faith and then just fall off the face of the earth when they get in a relationship. Or get super involved when

dating someone only to disappear when they break up. *Who's the god in that equation?*

I told him how, on multiple occasions, I've been the third wheel with a couple making out in the baptismal pool after I dunked them. *Cool, cool, cool . . . I think you kinda get it.*

"Fair enough," Bill said, observing my laughter but sensing the anger beneath it. "But why do you think that all makes you so mad?"

"Because the questions and the jokes make me wonder if there's something wrong with me," I admitted unexpectedly.

That was all Bill needed. He was like Luke Skywalker flying his X-wing toward the Death Star, knowing that even the most well-guarded fortresses have a weak point. My soul may have seemed completely closed off, but all he needed was one tiny opening. He noticed that question got a visceral reaction out of me and seized his opportunity, firing questions through the tiny window and into the depths of my soul to blow everything up.

"Have you been single your whole life?"

"Yeah," I told him. "I mean, when I was twenty, I was in a relationship for a few months, but that's it."

"How'd it end?" he asked.

"Anticlimactically. She called me one night and told me, although she knew I was a laid-back person, she was feeling insecure about how casually I was taking the whole thing."

"How'd that make you feel?" Bill asked, listening intently.

“She was right. Completely justified. It’s not like I wasn’t trying. I just didn’t have the same desire that most people seem to have to be in a romantic relationship. So, we broke up.”

“And that’s the extent of your dating?”

“I tried a few more times through my early twenties,” I told him, feeling like we were talking about pretty silly things for a session of spiritual direction. “I went on a handful of dates and enjoyed most of them. I got rejected once or twice,⁴ but most of the time, I’d get to the point where I’d be honest enough with myself to admit I’m just not all that interested in having a partner.”

“Why do you think it took you so long to admit that to yourself?” he asked.

“I guess because no one else seems to think that way,” I said. “And no one else seems to think I should think that way.” Most single people I meet with are hoping their singleness is coming to an end, not just getting started. I knew my way of thinking was a little unusual.

“And that makes you feel . . .”

“Like there’s something wrong with me,” I interjected sharply, a knot beginning to tighten in my chest. *I just met this guy. He’s simply asking questions. Relax.*

Bill gave me a reassuring nod, patiently prodding me to follow my anger, to let it out instead of pushing it down. “Do you want to be in a relationship?” he asked, setting up his shot.

“What I want is for everyone to leave me alone,” I told him, my face red and my blood beginning to boil. “I feel like everyone else is way more concerned about my relationship status than I am.”

“Do you think you are single because there is something wrong with you?”

“No!” I practically shouted, the knot in my chest bursting. “I think that’s what other people think about me. But I can never seem to explain myself to people. It’s like they don’t get it.”

The frontline soldiers in my soul, who are in charge of making sure I behave, made their last stand. I took a breath, hoping Bill would break the silence, but he didn’t—I knew he wouldn’t.

I was playing checkers.
Bill was playing chess.
And he put me in checkmate.

“Because Jesus was single!” I nearly yelled. “How are we not seeing this? I feel like I’m going crazy here. Why does everyone think I’m the weird one? We talk about following the way of Jesus, except apparently with one massive exception. WWJD? Probably not get married, but no one seems to see that.”

I took a breath, but Bill wouldn’t let me back down. “Give it a name,” he said. “What are you feeling?”

“I’m frustrated!” I said. “I don’t know where we got this narrative that singleness is the enemy of holiness. All I know is we didn’t get it from Scripture.”

He sat back, lifting his hands, motioning for me to continue.

“How about John the Baptist?” I said. “You know, the one who prepared the way for the Messiah? I’ve read the Gospels many times, and I’ve never seen a Mrs. Baptist. Unless she was down with locusts and wild honey for dinner every night, I’m pretty sure he was on his own.”

The humidifier was humming like a crowd cheering me on.

“I mean, there’s Martha. I’m speculating here,” I told him, for some reason feeling the need to cite my sources and explain myself to my own spiritual director. “But it seems like she was the head of her home. Which back then meant she was most likely single. And she hosted some of Jesus’s most significant nights of ministry. And then there’s Paul,” I continued. “Ever heard of him? The one who wrote thirteen of the twenty-seven books of the New Testament, planted like fourteen churches, and took the gospel farther than anyone before him. And he managed to do it all as a single person. So, Bill, if you are keeping score,” I said, reaching the crescendo of my rant, “that means the one who paved the way for the Savior of the world, the one who hosted the Savior of the world, the one who took the Savior of the world’s message to the ends of the earth—and, by the way, the Savior of the world—are on a long list of people who didn’t wait until they were married to begin their ministry. And so, yes, I’m frustrated,” I said, standing now. “I have no idea why no one else sees this. Please tell me you do.”

Bill was smiling; he knew we were getting somewhere. I was feeling my feelings. I was talking it out—the water in my soul was stirring.

What About You?

Remember what happened to my neighborhood pool when Jeff and Judy stopped showing up to stir the water? That’s how my soul felt until Bill started asking me the right questions.

Do you ever feel stuck in a rut? Like each day is turning into a slightly less exciting rerun of the day before? Like someone is turning down the saturation and the vivid colors of the world are fading to shades of gray? Ever feel like laughter is getting harder and harder to come by? Ever feel like the good gift of a glass of

wine with friends is slowly turning into a prerequisite for being present? Ever feel like you used to have creative ideas and big dreams for your future but now you're just trying to get through the day? Is an unhealthy pattern in your life starting to feel permanent? Ever feel your lust for life fading?

Those are symptoms of stagnant water. Those were *my* symptoms of a stagnant soul.

That's what your past can do to you. Oftentimes, when you feel stuck in the present, it's because you haven't dealt with the pain in your past. You begin to lose your passion for today because you can't stop replaying and ruminating on yesterday.

For all its beauty, life beats you up as you go. People betray you, lie to you, reject you, and gossip about you (and you return the favor). You get some lucky breaks, and you get some unlucky ones. Sometimes there's a drought when you need it to rain, and other times there's a downpour on your wedding day. In one hospital room, there are tears of joy, and in the next one, the tears hold deep pain.

Life is breathtakingly beautiful and callously cruel all at the same time. You aren't a blank slate every morning; today isn't immune to yesterday. When left untouched and unprocessed, that pain can keep you stuck on your mat, especially when you're single.

It's the classic Hollywood trope.

Boy meets girl, falls in love, and gets his life in order. Then she breaks his heart and he shuts down. Plops down on the couch on a Friday and watches the extended cut of the entire *Lord of the Rings* trilogy on repeat until the next Friday. Cut to Friday number three, and he's still there. The only thing that's changed is that his beard is longer and his breath is sharper—the apartment around him getting progressively dirtier as plates pile up in the

sink. By the fourth Friday, he smells so bad that his dog takes one whiff and walks away. “What?” he calls out as the dog scurries away. “Now you’re going to leave me too?”

Fade to black.

The rushing water in his soul has gone stagnant. Several bowls of ice cream and interviews with Peter Jackson about how they filmed the Battle of Helm’s Deep later, that stagnant water stinks. Our poor protagonist can’t enjoy being single today because he’s still caught up in yesterday.

Right around that time, there’s a knock on the door. Enter the mentor who is going to stir the water again. He throws open the blinds, and lights flood into the apartment, revealing it’s the middle of the afternoon. The protagonist winces at the light, and despite his protest, the mentor turns off the TV, pulls him off the couch, and pushes him back into the real world.

Don’t worry. The rest of this book won’t be cliché movie scenes, but the thing about Hollywood tropes is that they are littered with truth. Exaggerated truth. But truth nonetheless. We spend seventeen dollars on a ticket (which isn’t nearly as bad as all those in a relationship who have to spend thirty-four dollars) and sit through a two-hour movie because, deep down, it’s speaking truth about us.

This particular trope hits close to home for me. I know the single space really well; I’ve lived in it my entire life. The space where you can decide to be completely selfish with your time if you choose. Where you can think about yourself all day if you want. Where you can watch the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy all the way through, posting a picture between movies two and three to keep up appearances, and lock yourself away like Bilbo Baggins in Bag End⁵ for an entire day (just as an example).

No one sets out to live that way, but then life happens. The cruel parts aren't easily forgotten. We carry the pain and shame from difficult moments around with us, like an overzealous packer trudging through the airport.

Get bogged down by enough baggage, and soon enough, you realize it's a lot easier to just lie down on your mat and wait for someone to carry you. It's easier to stare at the stagnant water and blame the absent angel who doesn't seem to be doing their part.

Your soul stops thriving and starts merely surviving.

It gets stagnant. It gets stuck—trapped in yesterday instead of taking on today.

If I'm talking to you, I've got some really good news. When you keep reading in the gospel of John, you'll notice that Jesus specializes in stirring stagnant water. He didn't just heal the guy who had been on his mat for thirty-eight years; he walked into a festival, looked out over a sea of stagnant souls, and declared, "Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within them."⁶

Your soul may feel like a stagnant swamp, but it's meant to be a river of living water. Swamps stink, but rivers refresh. They sustain. They move life forward. You're made to do the same. Jesus gave us all an invitation to break down the dam and turn the stagnant swamp into a rushing river.

If you feel like I did that night in the church parking lot, you're not alone. Unpacking your past isn't easy; it can be hard to even know where to start. But the starting point for Jesus, Bill, and all the other mentors I've had in my life seems to always be just asking good questions, so here goes:

Is there something about singleness that irritates you?

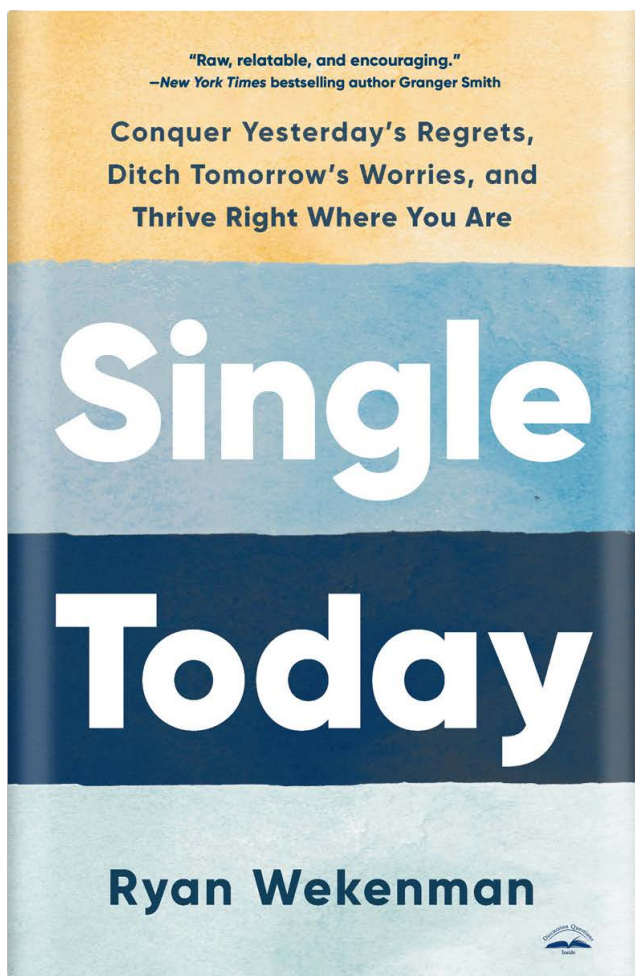
Is there a part of this topic that makes you want to go on a rant?

Did I say something in this chapter that frustrated you?

Don't rush this process. You can't heal what you can't feel. If you're anything like me, there may be a voice in your head telling you emotions like anger are bad and should be ignored. But that's not true. Anger can actually be an ally. Annoyance and irritation are like breadcrumbs leading you to the deeper parts of yourself; following them is the best way to stir the water in your soul.

So, follow them by writing out your answers to these questions in a journal or calling a trusted friend to vent about them.

Following the feelings and being honest about where they came from is the first step to healing, but as we'll talk about in the next chapter, that's just the beginning.



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