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The Good Book Company

Tel (US): 866 244 2165

Tel (UK): 0333 123 0880

Email (US): info@thegoodbook.com

Email (UK): info@thegoodbook.co.uk

Websites:

North America: www.thegoodbook.com

UK: www.thegoodbook.co.uk

Australia: www.thegoodbook.com.au

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Introduction

by Rico Tice

If someone asked you to tell your life story in twelve minutes, what would you say?

What would you include? What would you make sure you left out? Which pivotal moments and life-defining relationships would you need to cover?

In mine, I'd include my birth (it was a fairly fundamental moment, though I have no recollection of it), by caesarean section along with my twin sister. I'd talk about discovering that I was dyslexic, and the way I struggled with that all through my school days... I'd mention playing loads of sports as a teenager (no one asks you to spell on a hockey pitch). I'd describe my first job, as a youthworker in inner-city Liverpool, and how that shaped me. And I'd include getting married and having three kids.

I might leave out the time I was picked to captain the West of England cricket team for my age group. It was a huge honour, and I turned up that Saturday, excited and proud, to discover that the match had been on the Friday.

I would skip over the time, not long after I became a church pastor, that I was summoned to court and banned

from driving for six months because I kept speeding and I got caught. My wife still has the newspaper cutting stuck to a cupboard in our kitchen.

Every life story is different—with different hopes, views, regrets, achievements. So what would be in yours?

Well, the eleven people you're about to meet really did sit down with someone and tell their life story. Each of them was interviewed by a friend of mine, Rachel Jones. These are their twelve minutes, written down. Each of them have left in some parts they might rather have left out. They're all very different from each other—with different backgrounds, nationalities, colours, careers, experiences, personalities and difficulties. But, as you'll see, all of them found something more, right in the midst of the ups and downs and ordinary days and special days that make up life as a human being. Thanks for taking the time to listen to them.

I think you'll find them fascinating, because—well—people are fascinating. And I think you'll find them helpful too. After all, your story is as yet unfinished. And perhaps an even more fascinating question than “What would you include in your life story so far?” is “What would you like to be included in the next few chapters of your life?”

Most of us, however we got to where we are right now, are hoping for something different, something new, something more in life. A new relationship, or experience, or promotion, or location. Maybe you're reading this and your life story has taken a few wrong turns, and you'd love to work out how to get yourself heading in the right direction. Maybe you're reading this and you've always kept things on track, and yet the track never quite seems to get you to where you'd hoped to be and how you'd hoped you'd feel. Maybe you're feeling content right

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now—but still every now and then you wonder whether there might be something more.

This book is an opportunity to look at life through a different pair of eyes—an invitation to enjoy the stories of these people's lives, and perhaps to find inspiration and direction as you chart your own.

“I knew I still hadn’t found it”

Katie’s story

Katie looks how most people feel at 9 p.m. on a weeknight after work: tired. She’s changed into a stripy red and white top, taken off her make-up and pulled her dark hair back into a ponytail.

She’s Skyping from her flat in Shenzhen, China. It’s monsoon season—hot and humid. As she speaks, the draught from the air conditioning keeps blowing her hair into her face. She pushes it back with a sweep of her hand, saying, “Recently I have been so busy with... life”.

For most of her 20s, Katie’s “life” = work.

“I just wanted to be considered a success,” she says, looking back. “That was my goal. In the company I worked for, your whole team would get ranked at the end of the year, from the best performer down to the worst. No one wanted to be the loser. So every year I had a performance target in mind, and I worked really hard to achieve it so I wouldn’t get pushed down the rankings. I would get into the office and be so focused on work that the next thing I knew it was already three or four

o'clock in the afternoon. A ten-hour day was a good day, but sometimes it was twelve."

Where did her drive come from? "I think from my parents—especially my mother, because she had her own business. For her, your wealth was your worth. I guess she grew up in a time in China's history when everyone was very poor, so she was proud of the fact that she had made a name for herself."

Katie was born in what would be considered a "small town" by Chinese standards, but a city by any other. Like almost everyone else in her generation, she was an only child. Her parents were atheists, "but even though they didn't believe in God, they still tried to raise me with a value system and a sense of right and wrong. But I was not the kind of kid who just did what their parents told them. I was very strong-minded, strong-willed—an independent thinker. As I grew into a teenager, those differences of opinion led to some... heated conversations."

And it was a major argument with her mother when she was 15 that made Katie determined to study abroad. "I just wanted to be as far away as possible. And I succeeded—I left China at the age of 18 to come to university in the UK."

She got a job in the UK after graduating, and a decade later, her determination had paid off again with more success. "Outwardly, I had what everybody else would have called a very successful career. I earned a lot more than my peers. I could afford to travel; I was going on four international trips a year. I lived in a nice area of the city. I was hanging out with important people. I should have been content. But really, I felt empty inside."

Katie couldn't shake the gnawing sense that none of it really mattered. "I started thinking about the bigger questions of life: 'Why am I here? What is the meaning of living a life?' At first,

it was just occasional thoughts. I would push them into the corner of my mind and just think about something else. But gradually they became more and more of a concern. I would be on my way to work, thinking, 'Katie, you know this is not fulfilling you, so why are you still doing this? What's the point of all this anyway?'"

Eventually, Katie knew she needed to find some answers: "So, like many modern people, I went to a therapist. I had sessions for about nine or ten months. I went through my childhood issues, and that was really healthy for me. But it didn't go anywhere. It still didn't answer the questions of why I was born into this world, or what the meaning of life is.

"So then I moved on to philosophy. I enrolled myself on courses. I even went to a summer school at a university. But I started to realise that philosophy is a subject that's not about answers but questions. There aren't any proper answers—they use one question to answer another question. That's what philosophy was to me, at least," she says with a self-deprecating smile. "So I decided, 'Okay, this is not gonna help me either. I need something else.'"

Next up was religion: "As I am Chinese, Buddhism is kind of the go-to, default religion. So I travelled to several monasteries in the UK to talk to the monks and try to get a sense of meaning. I studied the Buddhist scriptures. I learned to meditate. And although reading the scriptures kind of calmed me, they still didn't have the answer. I knew I still hadn't found it. I didn't know what 'it' was, but I knew I hadn't found it."

Around that time, Katie remembered that one of her friends was a Christian. But she was reluctant to ask her about it: "It's funny—although I was willing to look into Buddhism, I still

felt like people who believed in God must be really stupid. I thought they just needed a crutch to lean on. But eventually I decided to speak to this friend. She was living in a different city, so I had to call her. We spent two hours on the phone together. At the beginning of the call, I was speaking like a normal friend would, like, ‘Hi, I just wanted to chat about your faith’ and all that. But over the duration of the phone call, I realised I had this anger coming out towards her. It really shocked me. I was saying things like, ‘If there is a God, why is there so much suffering in the world? Why has he let bad things happen to me? How does this make any sense?’ It almost felt like I was venting my anger at God through my friend. And to my surprise, she took it well. Wow—” Katie says, almost laughing in surprise now, “she took it *really* well. She didn’t try to rush in answering my questions, but she just really gently engaged me in that conversation. She came across like she had a peace that I just didn’t have. That really struck me. I thought, ‘OK, if that’s what your faith does to you, then I want to find out about it.’”

Towards the end of the phone call, Katie’s friend suggested she should try going to church. “She told me I should just go and see for myself. I said yes because she had been so kind to me on the phone, and I felt guilty for being so angry. I thought I would leave church after ten minutes—then at least I could tell her that I’d tried.”

But when she went to church, Katie didn’t leave early. The music was nice; but it was the Bible talk that really hit her. “It was based on a story Jesus told, and something clicked inside me. At the end of the sermon we stood up to sing, and as I was reading the lyrics, something just overcame me—this overwhelming feeling of love. It’s hard to describe... For the first time in my life I felt completely safe. Not physically safe,

but like, supernaturally safe. I remember I came out of the church building and I was a little bit shocked at myself.”

She joined a group at the church where they met to read the Bible and talk about it. “I was so struck by this person called Jesus,” she remembers now. “I thought, ‘If this is a made-up storybook, then this character is absolutely perfect’. I loved reading books. Books can touch you. But this was something different. I was so drawn to this personality that was just so full of love. Like, Jesus was constantly surrounded by crowds of people. There was this time when he tried to take his closest friends, the twelve disciples, away for a break because they were all so tired. They got in a boat to cross the lake to a quieter place

“For the first time in my life I felt completely safe.”

away from the crowds, but when they arrived at the shore, they realised the people had followed them there on foot. It says that ‘when Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd’ (Mark 6:34). That really struck me, because there have been many times when I’ve felt so tired that the only thing I want to do is just to escape from people! But Jesus, even though he was really tired, as soon as he saw people’s needs, he responded to them.”

But as Katie read more and more about Jesus, she came up against a problem: Jesus made some big claims about himself. “This really loving person, who I felt so drawn to, also said he was the Son of God—God himself, walking on earth as a human. He said that he was the ‘Christ’, the ‘Messiah’—the

King that God had promised to send hundreds of years before. I knew I kind of had to make a decision—was he telling the truth or not? I realised that if this person Jesus was true, he was the best person I would ever come across in my whole life. But if he said he was the Son of God and was lying, then he wasn't such a good-hearted, loving person after all. That would be a contradiction. But as I read about his character and the loving things he did, eventually I became convinced that he really must be who he said he was: the Son of God. I could trust him.”

Now, as she looks back on her search for answers, Katie wishes she'd started, as well as finished, her search with Jesus: “He's the One that every person is looking for. Everyone has something that you think is so important that you need to treasure it. For most of my twenties, that was my work. Perhaps for some other people that could be a boyfriend or girlfriend, or their parents’

“I knew I had to make a decision – was Jesus telling the truth or not?”

or friends’ approval. But living for these things will take all the energy we have. Whatever we do, we'll still feel like we are not enough. Even in the best human relationships, there's an element of transaction there—I'll do this for you, because you do this for me. But in Jesus, I have found someone who will always love me more than I love him. I don't think we can find that kind of love from any human being. It's only God who can give unconditionally without any strings attached. So when we ask him to fill our needs, he can.”

A few years after becoming a Christian, Katie met up with a colleague who she hadn't worked with for a while. "She said to me, 'Katie, at first we thought you were crazy with all this Christian stuff. But now every time I see you, you just become happier and happier. There's almost a glow on your face, and it's not just a front that you're trying to put on. Maybe there is something to Jesus.'"

So why is Katie so happy? Because, she says, she's found the answer to that question which plagued her for so long: what is the point of life?

"Now I live my life for Christ. It's like, if someone has given you 10 million in the bank, you probably wouldn't think much of giving a handful of change to someone on the street. Jesus has given me so much love that now I'm trying to share that love that I have received from him with the people around me. That's when you live your life to the fullest. I can honestly say that the more I grow in my faith, the more alive I feel."