

## EXCERPT



### **Learning to Be** *Finding Your Center After the Bottom Falls Out*

September 15, 2020 | \$22, 176 pages, hardcover | 978-0-8308-4587-3

Juanita Rasmus is copastor with her husband, Rudy, of St. John's United Methodist Church in downtown Houston. She's a trained spiritual director and a member of the Renovaré ministry team.

## The Summer of "The Crash"

It felt as though every nerve in my body was popping. Imagine large, strong hands slowly applying pressure while breaking a family-size package of uncooked, dry spaghetti. I was the spaghetti, breaking down one piece at a time.

It was a morning like any other. On August 27, I got up and cooked breakfast for my husband, Rudy, and our daughters, Morgan and Ryan. The school year had just started, and the girls were excited. I called them to come to the table, and as they sat down, I rushed to the bathroom to put on my makeup before I took them to school.

"Hey, I'll take the girls this morning," Rudy volunteered.

"Great!" I told him. "That'll give me a few more minutes to get ready and finish my makeup in the restroom instead of in the rearview mirror." We laughed.

Rudy and the girls finished breakfast, and we all said goodbye with our usual hugs and I love yous. I finished putting on my makeup and then opened the bathroom door to leave. Without warning, a horrible wave of nausea swept over me like a flu had hit. I felt so sick I could hardly walk or think straight. I'd never felt anything like it before, but I knew I couldn't go anywhere that morning. I called the office of St. John's Church and asked our secretary to reschedule my early appointments.

"If I lie down for a couple of hours, I'm sure that I'll feel better and will be in this afternoon," I told her.

Minutes later, however, I had an uneasy feeling that something was happening to me. I watched my hand pick up the phone, as if I lacked control over it, and hit the redial button.

When my secretary answered, I mumbled almost incoherently, "I'm not feeling well, and I don't know when I'll be back. I'm taking a leave of absence or medical leave or a sabbatical or something." And I hung up the phone.

I struggled to get back to bed, and as I lay there, it felt like every nerve in me was short-circuiting.

Days passed with me in bed, overwhelmed by a sensation of falling, spiraling and spinning into a pitch-black tunnel day after bleak day. I felt sheer panic as I tried reaching out to grab something—anything!—to stop my fall, but my hands found nothing to hold onto. The feeling was so intense, all I could do was to hope that I would finally hit bottom.

Around our house, that awful day is called "The Crash." Now that I have had time to reflect, I realize that it had a catalyst. A complex mix of stress, disappointment, grief, compassion fatigue, vicarious trauma, and discouragement had been building up for weeks, months, and years, but I discounted the warning signs.

Most summers, Morgan and Ryan had been involved in all kinds of activities. For some reason, the summer of "The

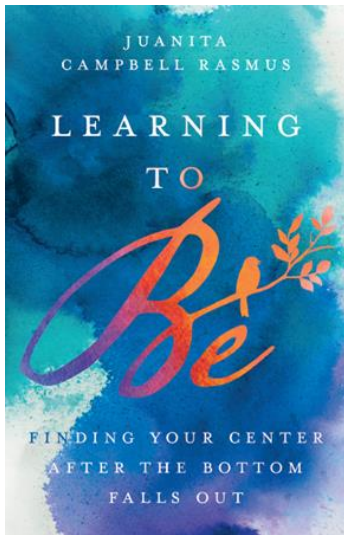


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Crash” was different. Normally, my summer workday ended at three p.m., which allowed me to pick up the girls from camp or wherever they were. That summer, however, the girls came to church with my husband and me every day.

I served as copastor with Rudy. We basically split the responsibilities down the middle along our lines of interest and giftedness. I was teaching two Bible studies a week, preaching every other Sunday, and was responsible for women’s ministry, spiritual formation, and pastoral conversations with the women. I didn’t counsel men and Rudy didn’t counsel women. It was a means to set healthy boundaries. Additionally, I served as the head of public relations for the Bread of Life, our nonprofit organization providing a daily meal to the homeless community we served in the church. The girls had learned to pack their books and toys when they accompanied us to work. That summer, the girls made beaded bracelets and necklaces that they sold to the businesspersons who attended the Wednesday noon Bible study. In addition to their coloring and crafts, the girls learned basic office tasks like helping to fold bulletins. They were typical little girls who found creative ways to occupy themselves.

Instead of leaving in the afternoon to spend time at home with them, I thought, *this is the best of both worlds. The girls are with us, and we can stay at church and get more work done.* It was the perfect arrangement for a performance-addicted perfectionist!

Many times, our family would run out for a quick dinner and then return to the church to work. When we finally returned home each night, Rudy and I often would talk about issues at the church. Then we would get up the next morning and put in another ten- or twelve-hour day.

Our church was growing at the rate of about five hundred people per year. (We had started the church with nine members.) Rudy and I served this three thousand-member congregation for years. We had no idea how understaffed we were nor the toll it took on us individually and as a young family. We had a handful of committee volunteers who helped us to keep the wheels on the bus, so to speak.

I often felt exhausted not solely by the work but by the emotional trauma that I experienced vicariously through meeting with parishioners and hearing their stories. Still, I loved what I was doing. What was the problem with doing a little extra work for the Lord? I loved God, and I loved the ministry. God calls us to sacrifice, right?

Vicarious trauma is like secondhand smoke—it can be deadly to those exposed to it. Clearly, we were not caring for ourselves in lifegiving ways. We were sleep deprived, ate fast food at too many meals, and depended on caffeinated drinks to give us a boost to keep going. All of these factors, I later learned, were “lifestyle deficiencies” that would catch up to us sooner or later.

Two years before “The Crash,” two very dear friends had died. Both times I rose to the occasion with my self-proclaimed vow: “I have to be strong for them, and then I can fall apart.” To this day I have no idea what gave me that notion. I didn’t take the time to process the pain. In fact, I’d never allowed myself to grieve any of the losses I’d experienced, including deaths, business setbacks, failures, broken relationships, and other disappointments. My way of coping with pain was to stuff it and keep moving.



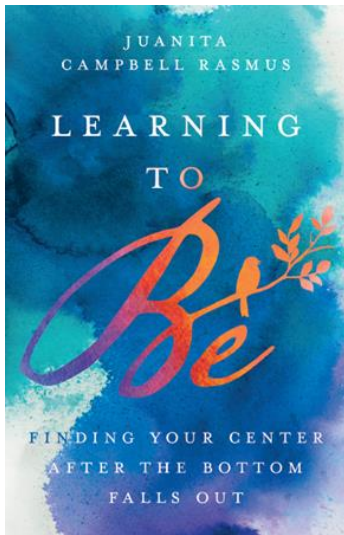
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Up to that point, my life had been rooted in the biblical model of the virtuous woman found in Proverbs 31 and the belief that I needed to be picture perfect. I had to be the flawless wife, the impeccable mother, and the textbook pastor. My whole identity was to be a “good little girl” who always did the right thing and pleased the people around her. Nothing less was acceptable to me. To always do the right thing meant I lived by rules. If I couldn’t figure out what the rules were in a situation, I created my own rules to live by that would keep me on the perfect path of righteousness.

My personality is Type A—high performing. Yet, the price of being so had caused me to lose my physical and emotional health. Forty years of buried feelings and pent-up stress caused everything to come crashing down that morning. It was as though I had built my life on a foundation of toothpicks. I lacked the tools to deal with the inevitable bumps and bruises of life. I allowed the pressure to escalate until damage was inevitable. I was meeting my deadlines for the most part, so I never noticed the growing problem.

I related to Martha when she went to Jesus and said, “Lord, don’t you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!” (Luke 10:40 NIV). In my head my mantra from the past, “Good girls don’t get mad,” played incessantly. I didn’t know what to do with that anger I had convinced myself I shouldn’t have. My body knew; the anger showed up as pounding headaches, stomach problems, and backaches that the doctor called sciatica. I called it a pain in the assets. It all seemed to come out of nowhere.

My emotions were like inflatable balls floating in the swimming pool. I would push them under the water, but when I finally removed my hands, the force of all that pressure and energy sent the balls flying out of the pool and into the air with rocket-like force.

Friends and family reflected on how wound up I was. Relationships suffered—I had too much to do to “waste” time talking to friends about getting together. I had things to do and places to go. Though I valued my friendships, my to-do list took priority over my to-be list. I was running on empty.

In the 1500s St. John of the Cross wrote the mystical poem titled “The Dark Night of the Soul,” and this was my contemporary version of that dark night. “The Dark Night” is an invitation to enter into the mystery of our unknowing, the unknowing of ourselves as composites and the unknowing of God. “The Dark Night” invites us to know and be fully known to ourselves and to know God in ways that perhaps we had never imagined. My dark night was for me the beginning of freedom.

In the chapters to come I am inviting you to enter my journey. I’ll explore how I arrived at this place, how it grew worse, and I’ll provide the spiritual practices that brought me to the other side. In each chapter, I include questions for you to reflect on your own journey or tips to help you assess where you are.

I chose to share my story because all too often in Western culture, and especially in the church, there is still a reticence to discuss mental health along with the related spiritual implications. It is my hope that by telling my story, light may be shed on the resources available to help someone in the aftermath of a mental health diagnosis, and that courage may be gained to wait in the darkness because often the real treasures are stored there.

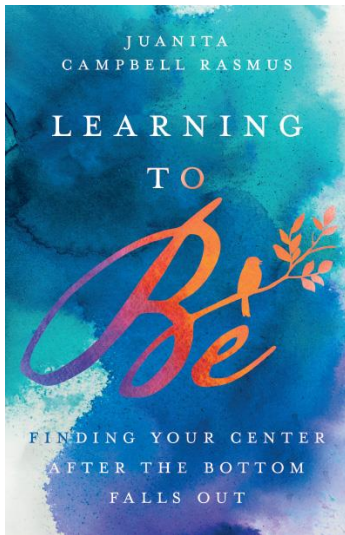
—Taken from chapter one, “The Stress of Living in a Do-Do-Do World”

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## Q & A



### **Learning to Be** *Finding Your Center After the Bottom Falls Out*

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When everything in her life came to a stop, Pastor Juanita Rasmus found that she had to learn to be—with herself and with God—all over again. Offering both practical and spiritual insights, she shares a wise, frank, and witty account of her own story of exhaustion and depression, acting as a trustworthy companion through dark days.

## A Contemplative Look at the Journey of Depression

### What motivated you to write *Learning to Be*?

**Juanita Campbell Rasmus:** I was motivated to write this book out of the awareness that all too often in our country a physical health or mental health diagnosis is treated in a solely allopathic way (a traditional medical perspective: diagnosing, prescribing, or amputating approach). I believe that physical and mental illness can also represent the need for tending one's soul, where root causes may be exposed and emotional and spiritual insights applied in light of the myriad of spiritual practices that are available. Mind, body, and spirit must be included when a person is diagnosed, if life-giving and transformative healing is to occur. I believe that my book speaks to the growing awareness of that trifold approach to the art of healing and the possibility for transcendence.

### How would you describe *Learning to Be* to someone in a few sentences?

**Juanita:** A contemplative look at the journey of depression and its invitation to claim the authentic self whose origin is in God. An intimate look at one woman's journey toward being and her work toward knowing wholeness. The distinctive element of this book is the use of contemplative practices as a means on the journey toward awakening.

### What are some key messages you hope to leave with your readers?

**Juanita:**

- Depression and suffering are not death sentences. There is hope, and there are spiritual practices that can serve as means of support as you seek the probable causes and pursue the invitation for the transformation of the heart (i.e., mind, emotions, and spirit) out of the darkness.
- Depression is an invitation into a new way of living by setting boundaries, learning to say no, and letting go of beliefs that no longer serve us, etc.
- Our illnesses, midlife crises, and other challenges just may be a space for learning what it means to ground ourselves in the central being who is God, and in so doing to find our own being.
- Depression invites us into excavation of the self, to answer the question, Who am I really?
- For many individuals, depression is an invitation to create want-tos, those personal desires that arouse passion, pleasure, and joy for living life authentically.



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*“Over the years, I’ve witnessed Juanita navigate the highs and lows of marriage, motherhood, ministry, and womanhood. I’ve seen her journey from the self-professed ‘good girl’ to a leader who wholeheartedly seeks God with a level of authenticity, transparency, and grace that is unmatched. And in this book, she inspires us to do the same.”*

—From the foreword by Tina Knowles Lawson

## Juanita Campbell Rasmus

**Juanita Campbell Rasmus** is a speaker, writer, spiritual director, and contemplative with a passion for seeing people through to their best life. She copastors the St. John’s United Methodist Church located in downtown Houston with her husband, Rudy. Beginning with nine existing members in 1992, thousands have joined the St. John’s family, making it one of the most culturally diverse congregations in the country.

Pastor Juanita is a trained spiritual director and has served as a member of the board of directors of Renovaré Inc. and its ministry team founded by renowned author Richard Foster. Additionally, Juanita serves on the board of her alma mater, Houston Graduate School of Theology. Juanita travels extensively, speaking on spirituality and on the lessons she learned after a life-altering major depressive episode in 1999, which she now shares in her book *Learning to Be: Finding Your Center After the Bottom Falls Out*.

Juanita cofounded the Bread of Life Inc., a not-for-profit corporation, with Rudy in 1992 and began serving meals to the homeless in the sanctuary at St. John’s. Years later the Bread of Life has changed the landscape of downtown Houston, providing tons of fresh food, an array of services to families in peril, and transformative services for homeless individuals. Juanita most recently teamed up with Tina Knowles Lawson and Beyoncé to help forty thousand flood victims recover in the wake of Hurricane Harvey in Houston. In addition to addressing issues of health and disaster relief, Juanita launched the Temenos Community Development Corporation in 2006 and recently completed over thirty million dollars in housing development projects for the previously homeless in downtown Houston.

After recovering from kidney cancer, Juanita founded a therapeutic art program facilitating the recovery and discovery of the creative self for homeless and transitioning individuals. Her goal is to tap into the power of creativity and its ability to restore individuals to meaningful and productive lives. The Art Project Houston takes the city’s homeless and empowers them to become hope-filled painters and artisans who craft their own livelihood and create lives filled with new possibilities.

Juanita serves on advisory boards for Rice University’s religion and public life program and re:Mind Houston (previously Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance). Juanita and Rudy live in Houston, Texas, and are the proud parents of two daughters.



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