

What people are saying about ...

## *Not So Fast*

“As I read this book, the Simon & Garfunkel tune kept popping into my head: Slow down, you move too fast. Because we really do. Ann—along with her family—has given us all a reason to hit the pause button, slow down, and acknowledge that God takes a greater role in our lives than all the things that fill up our calendar. *Not So Fast* is a gift to every reader who takes the time to slow down and breathe in its pages.”

**Lee Strobel**, best-selling author  
of *The Case for Christ*

“Ann has written thoughtful, realistic, and non-condemning help for families! She speaks from her own life experiences and level ground with those she is hoping to reach. Ann redefines what a ‘successful’ family looks like and offers solutions and insights that usher in hope and peace.”

**Steve and Misty Arterburn**

“*Not So Fast* is one of those books I wish was written years ago so parents would be prepared for the onslaught of activity thrust upon them and their children. Ann Kroeker writes with humility, passion, and invitation, beckoning families to slow down, enjoy life in the moment, and create sanctuary in the home. Her winsome challenge to overbooked families is to reevaluate schedules in light of relationship, both with each other, the community, and God Himself. A

highly practical book with countercultural underpinnings, *Not So Fast* is like water to frazzled families thirsty for rejuvenation.”

**Mary DeMuth**, author of *Authentic Parenting in a Postmodern Culture*

“Because our world encourages speeding up, we desperately need voices like Ann Kroeker’s to remind us that slowing down is absolutely necessary to find the balance we’re actually looking for. Kroeker will cast the vision on why you need to follow your heart and how you can get off the fast track. You owe it to your kids, your marriage, and yourself to read this book and find a more rewarding pace of life.”

**Jill Savage**, CEO of Hearts at Home and author of *Real Moms ... Real Jesus*

“Ann Kroeker’s natural ease with words manages to turn the business of reading her work into a holiday for the soul. But *Not So Fast* is far more than merely engaging and delightful; it is also and quite definitely a must read for anyone who wants to understand the joy of living fully.”

**Phyllis Tickle**, speaker and author of *The Words of Jesus* and *The Divine Hours*

“Just reading this book made me want to breathe deeply and slow down. What an important, practical book for parents scrambling to raise wise and happy children in a runaway world!”

**Mary Farrar**, author of the best-selling *Choices* and the newly released *Reading Your Male*

*Not So Fast* comes just in time for those of us who operate in an “ER” world—we want to be happier, richer, smarter, better, and quicker in everything we do. In a tone that is neither preachy nor scolding, author Ann Kroeker builds an airtight case for rearranging our priorities and entering the slower zone. With the help of several colleagues who add end-of-chapter essays, Kroeker blends research and anecdotes, suggestions and assignments. The result succeeds on several levels. The book is a fun read with a profound message that is packaged in a fresh way.”

**Holly Miller**, author, speaker, and  
adjunct professor of communication  
at Anderson University

“If you, like me, want to become less driven and less hurried and instead learn how to savor life, this book is for you. If you long to enjoy your kids rather than race to the next event, this book will show you how. Questions for families at the end of each chapter are worth the price of the book! A must read for today’s moms.”

**Susan Alexander Yates**, international speaker  
and author of *And Then I Had Kids*, *And Then  
I Had Teenagers*, and *Character Matters*

“I’ve never heard of anyone with a terminal illness who wished that he or she had attended more committee meetings or worked longer hours. Instead, most have regrets that they didn’t make more family memories or spend more time sitting at Jesus’ feet. The powerful stories, helpful tips, and fun activities in *Not So Fast* equip us with

the tools to put the brakes on our busy lifestyles and to focus on what's really important.”

**Michelle Cox**, author of *Simple Little Words*  
and *Mothers Who Made a Difference*

# Not So *Fast*

Slow-Down Solutions for Frenzied Families

Ann Kroeker

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Additional resources for *Not So Fast* can be found at the companion Web site:  
[www.NotSoFastBook.com](http://www.NotSoFastBook.com)

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To Philippe, Isabelle, Sophie, Nathalie, and  
Daniel—fellow travelers on the road less traveled.  
May we look back ages and ages hence and find  
that it has indeed made all the difference.

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# Acknowledgments

To live slower requires buy-in from the entire family. Fortunately my fellow travelers in the slow lane—Philippe, Isabelle, Sophie, Nathalie, and Daniel—are satisfied with a “not so fast” life. Without their support and flexibility, this book couldn’t exist.

Thanks to Don Pape’s friendship and enthusiasm, I was introduced to the David C. Cook publishing “family.” I’m grateful to Susan Tjaden for her gentle but firm editing—she cut the fluff and left the essence, turning *Not So Fast* into a resource that respects the time pressures that frenzied families face.

Lynn House, Julia Huber, and Sharon Stohler offered valuable input on early drafts, and the many contributors to *Live from the Slow Zone* shared insights and struggles that enriched this book. I’m indebted to numerous friends, too many to list, who patiently listened to me sort through the subject matter and often said just the right thing to help it fall into place. If I had the space, I’d list every friend I’ve talked with in the past two years.

Finally, I’m so grateful the Lord has shown me that by living more slowly I can enjoy a richer relationship with Him, and that my ideas and words should flow from that rich relationship.

Apart from Him, I can do nothing.

# Foreword

Solutions. Isn't that a wonderful word? It is one of my favorites.

I am soon to give birth to my fourth baby, bringing our blended family to five children all together. Enough said about why I love the word *solutions*?

I could use a few slow-down solutions in my life, though to be honest, I initially shook my head and even somewhat chuckled at the suggestion that any exist.

My husband's work and ministry life call him all over the world; he speaks in different venues and writes for multiple projects at any given time, always with further opportunities for more and more life-changing work with God. Our children are interested in multiple activities, often wanting to try new things, wanting social time with their friends—and each child has nightly homework and needs showers and wants time to just relax and play ... along with needing dinner. They must eat!

And believe it or not, I have goals too. While I truly love my role as wife and mom in our family and “being there” for everyone, I also have personal goals that involve just me, as a woman. There are books I'm trying to read, books I'm trying to write, entrepreneurial projects I'm working on—and I'd like to be crocheting right now for my new daughter on the way, and nesting, nesting, nesting.

Instead, our house is on the market, and I'm supposed to be packing and purging and preparing to leave, right when I want to be settled. To say the pace is "extreme" is a drastic understatement. While I do believe our children have a pretty decent pace in their lives, mine is *more* than extreme, and my version of a "decent pace" is changing. After reading Ann's book, I have been contemplating, in new ways, our family as a whole.

I was intrigued by this book title. *Not So Fast*. Could I afford the time to be reading this? No. I'm just trying to keep up with my daily Bible reading and study group literature. Could I afford *not* to read it?

No.

I needed this.

I encourage you to read it, too. I found great insight and hope in the pages of this thoughtful, realistic, and non-condemning help for families. Ann speaks from her own life experiences and from level ground with those she is hoping to reach. The message I received is that she's "been there" and has compassion for the pains and hopes and dilemmas of managing a family to grow in Christ, to be "successful," contributing members of heaven in the real world. Ann redefines what a "successful" family looks like. She writes not only about managing a family, but about guiding and encouraging each member, providing room for the gifts and uniqueness of each, as we are taught in 1 Corinthians 12. Ann offers ideas, challenges to parents, and practical *solutions*.

Take time to engage in the suggestions at the end of each chapter. The *Slow Notes* are my favorite part of this book. They offer real help, a real starting place, and real encouragement. The individual stories offered by various contributors in this book also provided me

with inspiration from parents who have made bold moves for their families or have been impacted by others who live a slower lifestyle. The examples set by Jesus, as described by Ann in this book, were truly beautiful to me and quieting to my soul.

Ann reminds me to rest by still waters. To allow God to lead me there and to guide my family in the same direction.

I am grateful to Ann for her courage and wisdom in sharing this message, and I am putting to use the ideas I found that can help me navigate more “successfully” in my own life-roles. I found reinforcement for the healthy family decisions we are already making and new vision for areas where we could simplify and create more *space*.

We all slow down at some point, whether by choice or by force. I’m doing it by choice, sooner rather than later—not as a result of the imminent total breakdown, physical exhaustion, and overload, and not because I’ve finally fallen apart or exploded. I’m doing it for the health, sanity, and connectedness of our family. I’m doing it to enjoy my life, my different roles, my dear husband, and the children I would die for. Hmm ... maybe this is another version of “*laying my life down*” and showing a “*greater love*.”

May you be inspired with courage and hope for a life that is carried in God’s current. What a desirable and wonder-full life to lead.

Grace, grace ... God’s grace ...

And happy parenting,

Misty Arterburn



# Introduction

Although the problems plaguing high-speed lifestyles are widespread and not limited to Westerners, I wonder sometimes, were I living in and writing for a laid-back, low-key, highly relational culture—Latin American, perhaps, or Mediterranean—would I have written this book?

My husband, Philippe, grew up in Belgium. His parents and all five of his siblings and their families still live in Europe. When visiting, I've noticed that many Europeans operate at a slower everyday pace. They live slowly enough to achieve their goals without neglecting their faith, family, or health. They eat leisurely meals together. If they see a friend at the grocery, they stop and talk. They stroll in the park. Their lunch breaks last considerably longer than five minutes and consist of something far more nourishing than a microwaved burrito. In fact, one of my sisters-in-law showed me her son's lunch menu at the school he attends in France, where they live. She was to check off his selections for the multicourse meals they would serve the students. Friends, this was not fast food. I salivated over his *cheese* course.

As she and I compared cultures, I attempted to describe typical American school lunch fare of chicken nuggets and tater tots wolfed down during a break no longer than thirty minutes—a miserable contrast.

Another of my sisters-in-law has lived and traveled in a lot of developing countries and explained the red tape of many governments—just getting one paper signed by the right person could take an entire day. People have come to accept the inevitability of standing in lines for hours, however, and have adjusted their expectations. Some even plan for it, packing a picnic lunch and enjoying interactions with the people in line around them.

When I heard her describe those people making the most of an entire day's wait, I admired their sociable nature, creativity, and pre-planning. And I can't help but compare and contrast with my own culture: America, the land of high-achieving, multitasking speedaholics. We're in perpetual motion, never resting, never quite satisfied. Imagine typical Americans picnicking and chatting pleasantly with people in line at the Bureau of Motor Vehicles. I can't quite picture it, can you?

I'm sure that there are times when even people in these slower cultures must accelerate to meet a short-term goal, deal with an emergency, or assist a friend in an urgent project, but because they aren't run ragged from day to day, they may have energy reserves to kick into gear as needed. Maybe their goals are more modest than ours, or they're satisfied with less. Maybe traditions ground them in a rhythm of life, where their days and weeks offer some predictability and stability in an unpredictable, ever-changing world.

We, on the other hand, assume that our days need to be filled with activities identical to those of the surrounding culture, and that our kids need to participate in a long list of sports and music enrichment opportunities in order to get ahead in life.

This default mode—these automatic assumptions—has left us with anemic relationships with both the Lord and each other.

Something is seriously wrong.

Our culture is suffering from what is being called “time sickness.” Slaves to our schedules and assuming that there is no gear other than overdrive, we’re literally sick and tired of living this way. Author Mark Buchanan discovered that the Chinese join two characters to form a single pictograph for busyness: heart and killing.<sup>1</sup> Most of us can attest to the figurative truth of that vivid representation; cardiologists can attest to its physiological truth.

Busyness and hurry are killing us.

We can’t keep living like this.

It’s too much.

It’s too fast.

People are starting to feel the pressure. They want to stop the mad rush and enjoy life. A 2008 Pew Research Center national public opinion survey reported that some two-thirds (68 percent) of middle-class respondents said that “having enough free time to do the things you want” is a very important priority in their lives—ranking higher than having children, being successful in a career, being married, living a religious life, doing volunteer work/donating to charity, or being wealthy.<sup>2</sup> It’s as if people are crying out, “I can’t keep living like this! Stop the ride—I want to get off!”

There are people who do recognize their need to slow down and seek solutions all over the place. Without discernment, they’re turning to the simplicity movement, yoga, Buddhism, and Eastern meditation. Some have embraced ideas promoted by the recently coined Slow Movement, whose roots are in the Slow Food Movement, a

resistance of sorts founded in Italy to protest the introduction of fast food to a culture that appreciates lingering over homemade meals shared with family and friends. People are exploring slow food, slow travel, slow schools, and slow communities designed to accommodate slower community events, interactions, and transportation options such as bicycling and walking.

Our family is also attempting to slow down in all kinds of ways. My kids—Isabelle, Sophie, Nathalie, and Daniel—don't mind our experiments too much. Slow concepts often overlap with "green" ideas, which are becoming common enough that fewer people look at us funny. Still, friends and neighbors occasionally ask them about our countercultural choices. *Why did you ride your bikes to church? Why hang your clothes outside to dry? You don't eat out every week? Won't your parents let you wear this?* Most of the time, the kids just grin and explain that we're slowing down. We have to be discerning, however, because while some ideas emerging from the growing interest in a slower lifestyle are helpful, there are plenty of spiritually questionable ones as well.

To be safe, we need to anchor our choices in a *person*—Jesus Christ—and we need to weigh them against His Word. Otherwise, it's easy to drift, unmoored. For everyone who yearns for the benefits of a slower life, I want to point to Jesus and say, "Start here. Start with the One who offers true and lasting peace. Look to His Word. Meditate on that. Learn from Him, for His yoke is easy and His burden is light." I wish they could see that the root of meaning and peace that we're seeking is found not in a yoga pose or a mind-emptying meditation session, but in a rich relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ.

I wish that we could woo restless, hurried, overwhelmed people to *Him*.

When I slow myself and spend time with the Lord, when I invest in my family and friends, when I live out my faith attentively and deliberately, I feel my scattered self settle. I find peace.

I pray that you will find it too, and I hope that this book can help you with that.

*Not So Fast* includes two practical features for those moving toward a slower, more reflective and peaceful life—a life that makes room for knowing and loving God and people. These features include *Slow Notes* and *Live from the Slow Zone*.

At the close of each chapter, the *Slow Notes* section offers slow-down solutions to apply immediately—in fact, you may find the *Slow Notes* to be the most practical part of your transformation to a slow-motion family. In *Live from the Slow Zone*, you'll hear from people reaping the riches of life in the slow lane. They opened up their less-frenzied lives so that we can get a feel for their pace.

My hope is that you'll catch the vision for a slower, richer, fuller, and more meaningful life. I long for us all to focus on what matters most. I would love for our hurried hearts and frantic souls to find their rest in Christ.

If only this book could be a voice crying out in this crazy, sped-up world:

“Slow down! Not so fast!”

In Christ,  
Ann

Additional resources at: [www.NotSoFastBook.com](http://www.NotSoFastBook.com)

# 1 What Are We Missing Out On?

Just before eight o'clock on a Friday morning in January 2007, renowned classical violinist Joshua Bell pulled his instrument from its case and launched into Bach's "Chaconne." For this special performance, he wasn't onstage at The Kennedy Center or Carnegie Hall. This particular morning, at the request of the *Washington Post*, he stood against a bare wall in the indoor arcade of a DC Metro stop, dressed in jeans, a long-sleeved shirt, and a baseball cap.

Wearing such ordinary attire in such a heavily trafficked, unremarkable public spot, playing for average Joes and Janes on their way to work, he'd be easy to mistake for just another nondescript street musician trying to make a buck.

He'd be easy to ignore, that is, if you didn't pick up on the dazzling sounds of this classical music superstar. Joshua Bell—one of the finest violinists of our time performing some of the greatest music ever written, who only three days earlier performed in Boston's Symphony Hall where "pretty good" seats went for one hundred dollars—was playing a bustling Metro stop for free. Incognito. The *Post* arranged this as an "experiment in context, perception and priorities ... in a banal setting at an inconvenient time, would beauty transcend?"<sup>1</sup>

Ah, would beauty touch people's souls? Would they respond to the music? Would they even notice he was there? Would large crowds

gather to take in the world-class performance placed directly in their paths?

During the forty-three minutes he played, 1,097 people passed by. Only *seven* stopped to hang around and listen.

Most scurried past, minds full of pressing appointments and projects due. Maybe they noticed, maybe they didn't. Perhaps they noticed but didn't want to give any money, so they lowered their heads and continued without making eye contact.

Reporters gathered a few stories. They interviewed those seven who stopped as well as many who didn't.

One who *didn't* stop stood out to me because she was a mom. I could easily put myself in her shoes. Bell was a couple of minutes into "Ave Maria" when this mom, Sheron Parker, stepped off the escalator with her preschooler in tow and rushed through the arcade. She walked briskly, pulling along her child by the hand. She faced a time crunch—she needed to get her son, Evan, to his teacher, and then rush back to work for a training class.

As they passed through, Evan was instantly drawn to the music. He kept twisting and turning around to get a look at Joshua Bell, but his mom was in a hurry. With no time to stop, she did what any of us might do—she positioned herself between Evan and Bell, blocking Evan's view. As she rushed him out the door, three-year-old Evan was still leaning around to snatch one last peek at the violinist.

A reporter spoke with Parker afterward, asking if she remembered anything unusual. She recalled, "There was a musician, and my son was intrigued. He wanted to pull over and listen, but I was rushed for time." When told what she walked out on, she laughed. "Evan is very smart!"

But Parker wasn't the only parent who hustled her child along. The paper studied the video and concluded:

There was no ethnic or demographic pattern to distinguish the people who stayed to watch Bell, or the ones who gave money, from that vast majority who hurried on past, unheeding. Whites, blacks and Asians, young and old, men and women, were represented in all three groups. But the behavior of one demographic remained absolutely consistent. *Every single time a child walked past, he or she tried to stop and watch. And every single time, a parent scooted the kid away.*<sup>2</sup>

Every single child that passed the music tried to stop. Every child yearned to listen. To see the bow dance across the strings. The children instinctively wanted to bask in the beauty and delight of the near-miraculous sounds that poured out of that Stradivarius violin and into their otherwise hustled-and-bustled everyday lives.

And every single parent scooted the child along.

*No time to stop and enjoy the beauty, kids; we have appointments to keep and money to make. We're running late. Let's go. My boss will be waiting. Move along.*

It could have been me. At one point, early in parenting, I might have passed right by on my way to something I thought was more important. As I wise up and embrace a slower life, I like to think I'd choose to stop, that I would have dropped everything and had my children sitting in a

semicircle around the musician. Absorbed. Transfixed. But even today it's possible I, like so many, would hurry past.

Those parents have better excuses than I would have had. They're working hard, rushing to make it to the office on time. Who can linger at a Metro stop listening to a street violinist and risk showing up late to an intense DC government workplace? They have to keep going, keep moving, watch the clock, and stay on schedule. There's no time for spontaneity, and no time to alter the plan to accommodate beauty and linger with it.

Taking in art, music, or stories takes time. It takes attention. Appreciating beauty requires a degree of stillness.

I thought of a trip we took to Paris on our way to visit family. I wanted our girls to see the Louvre, but we had very little time. So we embarked on a compressed, rushed, American-style "highlights" tour: *Hurry, kids!*

Run to see Winged Victory, snap a picture.

Rush to Venus de Milo—snap-snap-snap.

Quick, get in the long line to see Mona!

Enter the crowded, hot room.

Philippe lifted up each child above the crowd to peek at the famous lady locked behind bulletproof glass.

"Can you see it?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Take a good look."

"I see it."

"Okay." Next kid, same questions, same responses.

"You saw the painting?" we asked one more time before exiting.  
"For sure?"

“Yes, Papa! I saw it!”

And we left.

“That’s it?” they asked after we were out of the room.

“What do you mean, ‘That’s it?’” I replied. “That’s *It*. That’s the Mona Lisa!”

“But it was so *small*,” one of the girls remarked.

“I didn’t see it,” said another.

“The room was roasting hot.”

“I need a drink of water.”

“Why were people taking all those pictures with a flash when the sign said not to?”

Yep. That was it. Those are their rushed and hurried memories. They didn’t really *see* anything. Basically, they were in the same room as the Mona Lisa. That’s all they can really say about it, because we had no time to linger with one of the most enigmatic works of art in the entire world. We had to move along and make room for the next herd of tourists.

While we rushed past some statues carved by Michelangelo, I thought back to the long hallway that led to the Mona Lisa. How many other da Vincis did we pass on our way? There were two side by side that we could have stopped and studied, as there was no crowd right there. I did pause in front of them briefly. “Hey!” I announced to my family, “These are da Vincis, too!”

We could have stayed there as long as we wished—no crowds—but we were in a hurry, so we scurried along down the great, long hall.

Americans in the Louvre. *Quelle horreur!*

Yet, what beauty we brush past every single day—and scoot our children past as well! They learn, eventually, to ignore the impulse to

respond, to revel. They learn to be efficient tourists; diligent students hustled from one class period to another; and eventually busy and reliable employees answering emails and juggling multiple projects and reports. Over time, we schedule spontaneity right out of them. Without meaning to, we teach them that beauty isn't worth our time or attention.

Each child is born with eyes to see so clearly the beauty all around and hear rhythm in our speech; in their youth, children's ears aren't yet deadened to the music all around. They hear the mockingbird serenading them from a telephone pole. They stop to stare at frost patterns on window panes. If we would stop tugging them away, they would admire the Mona Lisa and Joshua Bell. Their hearts are still open; their minds alert. They would stop. They would linger.

They just need *us* to slow down.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning wrote a poem that included these lines:

Earth's crammed with heaven,  
And every common bush afire with God:  
But only he who sees, takes off his shoes;  
The rest sit round it, and pluck blackberries.<sup>3</sup>

I used to think: *Oh, that is so true.*

Not anymore.

I've concluded that few adults even see the blackberries, let alone the common bush, and certainly not the fire of God. I wonder if the only ones left who have a chance of seeing—the only ones who will even think to take off their shoes—are the children. We grown-ups

are too busy running, racing, rushing to even see the small faces lit with love and wonder, looking up at us in the busy Metro, asking to stay and listen to the pretty music.

I'm certain Joshua Bell won't be at the corner bus stop of our suburban neighborhood serenading us incognito as we drop off our kids and head to work. But what did I pass by this week? How much did I miss?

I'll never know. I *can't* know, because it's already gone. But, like mercies new every morning, tomorrow holds more beauty. Will I see it?

Jesus talked about those who see, but don't see: "Though seeing, they do not see; though hearing, they do not hear or understand" (Matt. 13:13).

He meant it spiritually, of course. He quoted from Isaiah, saying:

*For this people's heart has become calloused;  
they hardly hear with their ears,  
and they have closed their eyes.  
Otherwise they might see with their eyes,  
hear with their ears,  
understand with their hearts  
and turn, and I would heal them. (Matt. 13:15)*

Is this, on some level, a description of the people in the Metro? Of me? Does this capture most of our stressed-out, high-speed culture? Are our hearts calloused by the relentless pace and pressure of our schedules? Are we missing the beauty of Christ?

Maybe we can't see ... or, maybe we don't *want* to see.

We hardly hear with our ears. We've closed our eyes.

We miss Joshua Bell when he's only four feet away from us playing Bach.

Worst of all, we miss Yeshua, as well, even though He is right with us, inviting us to know Him.

Open our minds, Lord, to comprehend Your truth.

Open our hearts, Lord, to believe.

And slow us down, to take it all in.

*But blessed are your eyes because they see,  
and your ears because they hear.*

*(Matt. 13:16)*

I propose that we practice pausing at the end of each chapter—to slow, to pray, to begin to *see*—starting right now. Take a deep breath (which is an act of slowing), and peruse the *Slow Notes* that follow. You're welcome to abruptly slam on the brakes, but it's probably more realistic to ease into a slower pace as you learn to notice—and enjoy—some of the little things lost in the blur of a frenzied life.

## Slow Notes

Ask the Lord to open your family's eyes and ears to see and hear something from Him today. This is a great time to begin praying specifically about how the Lord wants your family to slow down. Ask Him to keep your eyes open to see Him more clearly in this crazy, sped-up world we're trying to evaluate. And then *be on the lookout for what He reveals.*

Consider trying out one or more of the slow-down ideas below that stand out to you.

- Take a trip to an art museum. Stare at something beautiful. Stare for a long, long time.
- Go outside with your kids and look at things with a magnifying glass: a violet, clover, an ant, some bark.
- Sketch something. Paint something. Sit with the kids to create art that takes your full attention: Try to copy a great work of art. Blob color onto thick paper like Van Gogh. Draw and shade some people or birds like Leonardo da Vinci in his notebooks.
- Borrow a telescope to look at some stars.
- Take close-up photos with your camera and try unusual angles to see everyday details a little differently.
- Write a poem based on something detailed that you observed closely.
- Borrow a Joshua Bell CD from the library. Listen to what all those people at the Metro stop passed by.
- Tell your children the story of the Metro concert, and then ask them to listen to the CD as well. What do they think? Write it down.

## Live from the Slow Zone: *Ann Voskamp*

We hear them far off in the woods, just as the sun sinks further down, and I stop, like you do when the world slips up behind and surprises you, and my son can't believe it either, so we stand there and listen long and neither one of us can stop smiling.

The frogs have returned.

Then, after a bit, he and the dog go crashing off through the quiet of dusk coming down, worn carpet of leaves rustling as they bound through, both boy and Lab questing for game and excitement, but his little sister and I, we just stand there, having already found it. For hadn't I mentioned that the frogs had returned?

On pond's rim, she, her small fingers entwined through mine, stands wordlessly. A symphony of sound, trilling low and deep, fills the spaces between the trees, lifts us too. The light falls warm on our winter-faces, and this tattered snow still hugs water's edge. But that sound. From where? It is like it's the water itself, a looking glass of trunks and limbs, that croons.

At first, when I am still looking with everyday eyes, I don't notice them. It takes time for eyes to adjust to stillness, to slow and really see. And then, there they are, on the far side, these glinting eyes flickering up through waters cold and murky. The peepers are back and we see them.

I want front row seats. Can we pick our way across the swamp and closer? She squeezes my hand tight and across the bog we splash.

In a flash, the pond snaps shut. All is soundless. Just glassy reflection of branches pointing to that curve of muted moon come early.

She and I swish swash further out, as far as we can go. Then wait.

On this isle of tangled grass, the water slowly rises up to boot ankles. A red-tailed hawk swoops and soars, his wings motionless on the currents. Moon rides higher, tailing sun dipping. We say nothing, this Little One and I, but watch swamp's mirror, waiting

stock-still for singers emerging. Bungler Lab charges up, smashing reflection of anticipating faces.

“Go, Boaz!” she whispers in a loud lisp. “We waiting for the frogs to thing!” From within the woods somewhere, boy whistles and dog ricochets off.

Again, we wait.

Then one by one, they pop to the light. We catch our breath and dare not move. Then tentatively it comes, this chorus, then crescendo, throaty yet gilded, and she squeezes my hand and we smile, spellbound.

Long we soak in these songs on golden pond.

And then, when our toes are cold and the shadows stretch to fading dark, it’s time to go.

“We leaving the frogs, now?” she whispers up to me.

True, I too could stay here forever, but yes, time to go home. Things to do.

We splash through the water, feet seeking islands of matted grass. The sudden hush turns our heads. She’s soundless, the swamp, blinked silent by our sloshing.

I scoop her up and tickle her ear with what I’m endlessly learning and relearning:

“Sometimes we only hear life sing when we still.”<sup>4</sup>