

A Conversation with Emily Ley, Author of *Grace, Not Perfection: Embracing Simplicity, Celebrating Joy*

Q. You're the creator of the top-selling [Simplified Planner](#)[®], a self-taught designer, a flourishing entrepreneur, and an insanely busy mother of three. Have you always wanted to write a book, too?

A. [Laughs] Well, yes. When I was little, my favorite thing to do was to hide in different places in our house and read with a flashlight. I've always been a bookworm. When I was in college, I had what felt like an identity crisis rooted in the feeling: "Okay. This is it. I have to decide who I'm going to be as a person."

I tried a few different majors. Finally, I thought, I'm just going to follow my heart. I love to read and I love to write. I'm going to be an English major. I don't know what I'm going to do with that, but I'll go that direction. And it was one of the best decisions I ever made because it really taught me the nuts and bolts of writing.

I always thought writing a book would be great, but it was this big dream and an enormous project. I have friends who have written books, and I thought it was a victory meant for other people. But when Harper Collins reached out to me at the end of last year, I decided, let's do it!

So as big of a personal accomplishment as this was for me, what I wrote in the book's introduction is also true: *Grace, Not Perfection* is really for the readers. I know there are so many women out there who, like me, have become stuck on the hamster wheel of trying to do it all. I'm sharing my story alongside useable tips and lessons I've learned to help them regain control and jump off that wheel, as well as to help them know that there are others who have been right where they are.

Q. You're a big proponent of "simple." Simple sounds like it would be easy. So why is it so hard?

A. I tend to believe that we all take life a little too seriously. And we tend to overcomplicate just about everything. That said, our daily lives are so busy. It's very circus-like. We have so many things that pull on our heartstrings and our calendars. It's hard to live "simply" because we are complex people and life is constantly moving and changing.

So today, what "simplicity" really means is defining what matters to you, then basing all decisions on whatever that is. If my family is what matters first and foremost to me, no matter what the decision is—business, personal, marriage,

family—the choice becomes easy when it’s based on how it affects what matters most. Make a mission statement that you can refer back to again and again. My mission is to do my best for my family and to do my best for our customers, and those twin goals serve as the underlying answers to all of my questions.

So while living simply may seem really complicated, it’s actually pretty easy once you decide what matters and protect that fiercely.

Q. You write that women are “doing no favors by putting themselves last.” Do you think women are especially susceptible to taking this approach? If so, why?

A. Yes, I do. As women, we care so deeply about so many things and so many people. When we add comparison on top of all of that, it’s easy for us to put ourselves in a backseat and deny ourselves as a priority. We say, no, these are my priorities: kids, job, husband, friends—they deserve all of my attention. And then we leave ourselves in the backseat, somewhat permanently.

But ultimately, we hit a wall. We realize we’re running on fumes and that while we thought we were doing the right thing, we have actually been sabotaging ourselves.

By the way, I’m the worst at this. [laughs] I never set out to write this book as someone who is just totally in control of her life and organization and doing everything right. I’m writing as myself—a girl who is living it, too. I know it’s hard. But a little, constant voice of reason breaks through in my head, and in the book, I share that.

Q. You’re also so honest about your own personal struggles in this book. Did you ever think, “You know? I could just tell them how to organize their entryway without delving into our experiences with infertility or my visit to the neurologist a few years ago?”

A. I know what it’s like to feel alone in your situation. When I went through infertility with my husband, I felt so alone. I knew I wasn’t the only person in the world who has ever been through it, but I felt like I was. It felt like there was no one I could talk to who had been there and would understand all I was dealing with and how the experience was impacting my life and marriage.

When I wrote *Grace, Not Perfection*, I knew I wanted my readers to know they’re not alone. Sometimes life is really hard. And in the really hard times and even everyday tough stuff we deal with as women, it’s okay to put yourself first. It’s okay to take care of yourself. It’s okay to prioritize you. You know, even when business is really busy, it’s okay for me to shut the laptop and walk away

because at the end of the day, I refer back to the mission statement I mentioned earlier that spells out what really matters. And it's okay to choose that.

I really feel like women these days are looking for permission to be flawed. That's something that everyone—including me—is thirsty for. For my readers, I just want to be a voice like a friend sitting across from them at a coffee shop, saying, "You know what? It's *all good*. It's okay."

Q. It will undoubtedly be helpful for women to watch you go through your own epiphany, too—when you decided, "I'm going to let this go and offer myself grace now."

A. Absolutely. In business, I'm someone who is meticulously concerned with image and brand cohesiveness, with everything pulled together and displayed properly. I care about packaging and making sure everything is dialed in and fine-tuned; all the t's are crossed and i's are dotted.

It's hard being that person and then coming back to my personal life and accepting that it's okay that the ends are frayed—that some pieces are unraveled and not perfect. But here's the deal: My life is not a product. My life is not a brand. My life is messy—but also happy.

Life is crazy! And that's cool, you know? Embracing that has been completely life changing for me. I'm sitting in my bedroom right now, and my bed has not been made in almost a week. That used to give me hives. [laughs] But something had to give recently, and I'm just letting go.

Q. Let's talk about some of your specific advice. You stress the importance of saying no—of finding things to say no to and slowing down. How do we decide what to say no to?

A. In the world we live in, women are often chasing more. We're always trying to keep that forward momentum: bigger, better, faster, all those things. So it's counterintuitive to say, you know what? What you need is less. Less stuff and fewer commitments on your calendar.

In my life, less has made such a big impact. When you do say no to things that don't advance your mission statement—remember, that thing that matters most—when offers and commitments don't fall in line with that, you say no to them.

And then, you begin to develop margin in your life: physically, mentally, on your calendar. It's like this big open space for the good stuff—for rest and creativity and art to happen. I say all the time that when I get too busy, I lose all creativity. I can't be my best when I have a to-do list a mile long. The same holds true for calendars and clutter.

Saying no to one thing means saying yes to something else. And that's changed my life.

Q. You also offer clear suggestions for how to get organized. Let's talk about the importance of Sundays—the tidy up, weekly planning, rest. Sunday is HUGE here. Why?

A. I know God tells us Sunday should be a day of rest. I think that can also mean preparing yourself to have restful moments throughout the week. If I don't take Sunday to get ready for the week ahead—to get the laundry done, do weekday lunch prep, and get my home back to square one—then I feel frazzled and frayed all week.

In our house, we use Sundays to take stock of what needs to be done. We pick up the house and tackle all the little things so that on Monday, we start with a clean slate. We are set up for success because of what we did on Sunday.

I have had some people say to me, "That's not restful!" But to me, restful is getting myself ready to go. Getting ready for a good week. It's good for me, and it's good for our whole family.

Q. That's such a good point—putting in the time on Sunday ensures that you can have "moments of rest" throughout the week.

A. Right. I think my whole brand—the Simplified Planner[®] and all of our other products—came out of me having so many things that live inside my head: don't forget to do this, don't forget to do that. Appointments, lists, and "don't forgets" were all banging around inside my head. I realized that if I didn't get all of that out of my head to give myself some brain space, I was going to implode.

So I made up the Simplified Planner[®]. Now, it's a tool for people to put all their brain stuff in. And that creates margin.

Q. I also love the way you describe our "things"—the way you categorize them. When did you first start thinking this way, and how much has it helped?

A. When I was a little girl, I was like any kid—I didn't want to clean my room. So my mom would make it a game. She'd say, "On Saturday, we're going to take four hours to go into your room with a trash bag, a donate bag, and a keep bag." And she and I would go through my room. She did it with me, we turned on music, and it was fun. She would also help me make my bed and then turn it or change something else in the room to make it feel fresh.

She's really the reason that I fell in love with this idea of a fresh start. That's what all this is: clearing out your space, getting rid of the clutter. I believe physical clutter is mental clutter. That all the things that live in your space take your attention visually or mentally, even if it's just you walking past them and thinking, "I need to throw that away."

Q. You pay a lot of attention to space: how a space feels, whether it's relaxing or not, whether it helps make us happy or not, whether it's conducive to productivity or not. Smells, too—you're big on candles in key places. Have you always recognized the importance of space?

A. When it comes to my relationship with space, it goes back to that experience with my mom. She came into my room and helped me give my own little space in our house a fresh start—clean it out and organize it, make a little change here and there. It all added up to feeling able to take deep breaths—big gulps of fresh air. I crave that. I crave that moment when I can walk around and think, "Okay. I'm ready."

It's not really about your surroundings. It's more about your inner self, and that you can suddenly breathe. It's a newfound confidence that lets you know you're ready to take on the day. So when you look at it that way, space is everything. No matter what kind of space you're in—a small space or a really large space, a dark space or a space with furniture you don't like—you can make it your own. It can be inspiring and it can fill you up and help create margin, or it can do the opposite.

Q. The tips in the social media section were a revelation to me—Unfollow Friday? Brilliant! If a feed is making you feel less than, don't follow it. It's so simple, but I don't think anyone does it. When did you realize this?

A. When I first started my business in 2008, Etsy was new, there was no Instagram, and Twitter was everything. So I started following all the people I thought I was supposed to follow—to be connected and network and be part of something I wanted to be part of.

Later, I realized that by doing that, I invited those people into my head, whether they knew it or not. And I started to notice negative feelings I'd have toward someone who wasn't doing anything wrong. I'd feel jealous, angry, annoyed—things I didn't want to feel. I thought, "Why on Earth was I allowing that in my head?" It's nothing they were doing. It was something I'd invited into my mental space that didn't need to be there. Fixing it was just as easy as unfollowing someone. It's amazing what that can do for your head.

Q. You also give readers permission and encouragement to outsource some chores—that's not something I think a lot of folks do. It seems like

most experts are trying to tell people how to do everything. But you say it's okay to get help. Do you feel like that's a different message culturally?

A. I do. I think as women, we often think we need to be good at everything. But I'm a terrible cook. I've always wanted to be a really good cook—everyone in my family is. But we have a friend who started her own business cooking healthy, kid-friendly meals for families in our area. One day, I bought a couple of meals from her, and I had this crazy mommy guilt. It was awful. My mom cooked and put dinner on the table every night, and she is an amazing cook. I felt like I was somehow less of a mother if I outsourced this.

But I started to realize that my attitude at the dinner table was a lot different when I wasn't struggling to get a meal prepared at the end of the day when the kids are hungry and ready for bed. Instead, when I purchased the meals, I was able to sit down, feel relaxed, and enjoy 25 minutes at the table with my family eating food we all like that's good for us. It saves us money too, by the way. And I realized it was worth it.

It is better for our family, especially during this season of life. So four days a week, I get food from our neighbor. I'm supporting another woman's local business, and I don't have to think about weeknight meals. That's a win-win.

I'm a big believer in outsourcing what isn't your forte. I have other things I'm good at—I don't need to be good at everything.

Q. In addition to showing readers how to better care for themselves, you devote time to showing us how to care for our kids, marriages, and friends. I know a lot of women feel like that's all they do or they just don't have time. Why was highlighting ways to care and love better important to you?

A. Caring for your people is huge on the heart of any woman, whether she's a mother or a daughter or a sister or a friend, or a combination of all of those. Life can get so busy that we neglect those relationships a bit, as well as our relationship with ourselves.

It was important to me to address these relationships because they're part of our hearts. They impact everything else in our lives as well. We are all just looking for ideas about how to love better and bigger. Even when life is really busy and complicated, I know I'm always looking for ways to connect with my kids and my husband.

Q. The insight you give into the choices you've made for your business—what you want it to be, how you want it to grow to allow for the life you want—will help a lot of folks too. Was this just instinctive for you? Making these big-picture choices, I mean.

A. I looked around me and saw women and men who were successful in business, and then I saw women and men who were successful at home. I knew my husband and I were about to have children. We were having infertility problems, but I knew kids were coming.

So I just thought about what I wanted my life to look like. I was standing at the crossroads, on the brink of one phase of my life. I asked myself questions like, “What do I want my days to look like?” “What do I want my mornings to look like?” “What memories do I want my kids to have?”

My mom was a teacher for more than 30 years. She had the best of both worlds: a career she loved and the ability to be available to our family. I knew teaching wasn’t my calling, but I wanted the same flexibility, first and foremost. I also wanted to have a job that I love that involves helping other people. And I wanted to be able to go to “Muffins with Mom” on a Tuesday at 11 and not have to worry about it.

When I launched my company, I started it with all of that in mind. That’s not to say that a million times over, the reins got away from me and the horse started running in a different direction, and I had to get it back on track. That happens daily. But it all goes back to the core of who I am—my mission statement. What am I about? What life do I want to have? And how do I keep steering this thing so that it’s going in that direction and we’re living out our mission and not chasing the wrong things.

Q. You tell readers to embrace grace. What does that feel like? For all of the perfectionists out there—how do we know we’re doing it right?

A. I feel like I am choosing grace in the afternoons around 4:45 p.m. That’s when I have three kids alone, and I’m waiting for my husband to get home from work. Everyone’s hungry, everyone’s a little overtired, and bedtime is coming. My phone and inbox are dinging and ringing at me, and it feels like everything needs my attention. My kids are probably not being perfectly behaved, and I’m frustrated that I don’t already have dinner ready. I’ve got all these balls in the air.

But I just sit down in the floor, in the middle of a pile of Legos and puzzle pieces. I choose to play with my kids because that’s what matters. My inbox is still full, the house is a disaster, and dinner still needs to get on the table. But when I get on the floor with them and just let go, that’s when I feel grace the most: when I’m sitting in the mess.

Q. Finally, if your readers just have one takeaway—even though I know there will be way more, especially as far as tips — but as far as big-picture ideas go, one takeaway, what do you hope it is?

A. Whether my reader is single or married, a mom or child-free, in a career she loves or at home full-time, feeling pretty together or feeling like a total mess, I want her to have the same takeaway. I want her to shut this book and say, “This is good enough. I am good enough, just like I am right now, with what I have and as who God made me to be. I don’t have to be anything more.”

That’s truly what I want every reader to gain: the knowledge that you don’t have to be perfect. You are enough.

About Emily Ley

Emily Ley is Founder and Creative Director of Emily Ley Paper & Gifts. She is also the creator of the bestselling Simplified Planner®—a daily agenda for what matters most—and author of *GRACE, NOT PERFECTION: EMBRACING SIMPLICITY, CELEBRATING JOY* (Thomas Nelson; ISBN: 978-0718085223; October 11, 2016; \$16.99). Raised in Pensacola, Florida, Emily graduated from the University of West Florida with degrees in English, creative writing, and public administration. She would later become the executive director of the city ballet. From there, she worked in nonprofit management and public relations before launching her brand in 2008. Following the success found at its online home, the Emily Ley brand quickly grew to be carried in retail outlets across the United States and around the world. Emily has been recognized with numerous awards, including Best New Product at the National Stationery Show as well as being named one of the Top 10 Designers to Watch in 2015 by *Stationery Trends Magazine*. Emily lives with her husband and three children in Tampa, Florida. For more information, please visit www.EmilyLey.com.