

# The Mary Experiment

When DOING and BEING Collide

DIANNE DEATON VIELHUBER

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**The Mary Experiment:  
Challenging Busy Marthas to Sit at Jesus' Feet**

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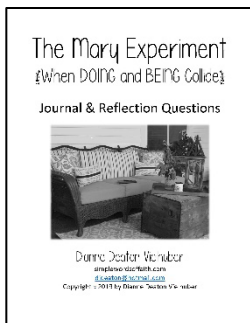
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## A Special Invitation from Dianne

If you are a person who struggles with too many things going on in your life, *The Mary Experiment* is designed for you. Each chapter includes Reflection Questions and a Prayer. To dig even deeper, please go to <https://upbeat-writer-402.ck.page/36c55012ba> and download the free *Journal and Reflection Questions* PDF. This Journal is designed to help you examine your own life and encourage you to begin your own Mary Experiment. Whether you study this book by yourself, with an accountability partner(s), or as a group book study, the Journal provides additional questions, reflections and opportunities for you to embrace the concepts articulated in *The Mary Experiment*.



For more spiritual encouragement and reflection, please sign-up to receive my blogs at [www.SimpleWordsofFaith.com](http://www.SimpleWordsofFaith.com). Share your own spiritual journey in the Simple Words of Faith group on Facebook. I look forward to meeting you regularly there!

Would you like a daily prayer as you begin your day? Text simplewordsoffaiith to 608-924-5208. Every day, you will receive a free daily prayer text to help center you in the Spirit of God.

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*When I wake up in the morning, I look forward to my daily devotional text message. It sets my mood for the day and inspires me. I enjoy being able to look back at it throughout the day during challenging or reflective times. I am able to see devotions from today to two weeks ago for my reference to help inspire me in whatever I may be facing. This has been truly a blessing in my life to help reset my focus on God throughout each day. - Liz Nelson*

*It is a blessing every morning to receive a devotional text message from Dianne. It is a 7 a.m. wake up call which I look forward to. Frequently, it is like she can 'see' my needs - looking into my soul. Sending a thoughtful message just for me. Something to think about throughout the day. - Rhoda Barden*

## Dedication



This book is dedicated to my husband, whom I affectionately refer to as Hubby Rick. Thanks for encouraging me to follow my dream and let it come to life through the pages of this book. You have unconditionally loved this recovering Martha in the most gracious of ways. Most importantly, thanks for encouraging me to be the Christian God calls me to be. You will always be my Sweetie Pea!

XOXO -  
PD



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## The Story

*While Jesus and his disciples were traveling, Jesus entered a village where a woman named Martha welcomed him as a guest. She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to his message. By contrast, Martha was preoccupied with getting everything ready for their meal. So, Martha came to him and said, "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to prepare the table all by myself? Tell her to help me."*

*The Lord answered, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things. One thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the better part. It won't be taken away from her."*

**- Luke 10:38-42 (CEB)**



## INTRODUCTION

### The Talk

It was NOT what I wanted to hear.

For 19 years, my professional occupation had been serving as a pastor. When teaching and sharing messages, I often encouraged people to live the life they want. A life which focuses on the things most important to them. A life with few, or even *no*, regrets at the end.

I know who God is in my life. I practice my faith. I accomplish countless tasks. But contentment is missing. A peace that passes all understanding is mostly at bay. 'Joy-filled' isn't exactly how I would describe my daily life.

At the beginning of summer in 2017, my husband, whom I affectionately refer to as Hubby Rick, shared a simple request. He wanted to eat lunch and go for a walk together a couple times a week. A reasonable request, right?

As important as I would like to say this was, I did not hold up my end of the deal. By mid-summer, I had only fulfilled Rick's request once or twice.

After supper one July evening, I suggested we go for a walk. During the first 17+ years of our marriage, Rick and I did not see each other every day. We saw each other only a few days a week. As a multi-tasker, I envisioned this walk would provide time for us to catch up on the week's happenings.

The previous days had been difficult. One of the churches I was serving at the time was the victim of a \$20,000 internet scam - over one-quarter of this church's annual budget. Every waking moment of my life felt consumed with managing this challenge. Add in a funeral and extra work for my part-time non-church job, and I was near my limit.

Our conversation began with me sharing thoughts related to the internet scam. Mid-rant, Rick abruptly stopped walking. He looked me squarely in the eyes and asked me when I was going to get my act together. When would I focus on doing the things *we* talk about accomplishing, but he ends up doing on his own because I don't prioritize the time? When would the things I say are the 'most important' truly become my top priorities? When would I be available for something other than work?

Whew. That wasn't the talk I had in mind.

I am a recovering over-committer. Historically, I have had little ability to say "no" to an immediate need... unless it related to my own personal care. Caring for those most important to me often slid down the list as well. While I yearned for "balance" in my life, I had lost

all ability to have a clear understanding of what balance was.

This was not something new for me. I have struggled with this since as far back as I can remember. As a young child, I knew there were more choices of what I *could* do, than I would have the opportunity to complete. I purposefully designed my life to try and do it ALL. I have mastered the art of knowing just enough about a multitude of things to make me dangerous. Although this has often served me well, I am consistently over-extended. I have prepared and led a funeral service; printed and folded the worship bulletins; made the luncheon sandwiches; played the special music; and conducted a meaningful graveside service... all for the same loved one. Typically, I'm tired and exhausted - but at least I am never bored!

At the time of my most recent zero-ending birthday, I mentally took stock and evaluated my life and priorities. While some parts of my life were OK, others felt completely out-of-sync. I longed to experience a deeply devoted life to God, using my very best gifts and talents for the glory of God's kingdom. My core yearned to know that what I do makes a difference.

Some people may look at me and think that was already what I was doing. My heart said something different. I felt like a car with 200,000 miles on it - in working condition, but *well* used. A little rust here and there, with parts showing age. I have burned through lots of tires, and the current ones are bald. They might explode if another unexpected pothole appears. It is an

OK car. But is “OK” good enough in this journey of life?

A biblical story that resonates with my life is Luke 10:38-42. Jesus is in Bethesda visiting siblings Mary and Martha. During the years of Jesus’ full-time ministry, He developed a close relationship with these sisters and their brother, Lazarus (Yes, *that* Lazarus). On this visit, we observe Martha scurrying around the house, entertaining house guests. Her guests’ feet are properly cleaned upon arrival. She makes fresh hummus and offers just-pressed olive oil for dipping warm, fresh bread. Guests sit on comfortable pillows in the appropriate pecking order from Jesus. With water to haul in, wine to decant, candles to light and a whole host of other duties, this hostess with the mostest has an endless to-do checklist.

We feel the tension of Martha doing ALL the work while her apparently lazy sister, Mary, ignores her. I can hear Martha huffing to herself, “How can Mary have the audacity to just sit there? Can’t she see there is so much to do? Why isn’t she helping me?”

Martha’s frustration escalates. Did she try to address Mary privately? We do not know. Our front-row seat comes when Martha takes her complaint all the way to the top: to Jesus. She pursues “the talk” with Jesus.

For those of us who are “doers,” we have empathy for Martha. Jesus’ response would have shocked us too. He turns Martha’s world upside down when He honors Mary for simply sitting at His feet and hanging

onto every word He says. I hear Jesus chuckling as He tells Martha to take a chill pill and stop worrying about whether the silver has been properly polished or not. “Instead, come sit with me,” Jesus says. “Only this is really important.”

We do not know how Martha responded. But it cannot have been fun to be the receiver of Jesus’ stinging words. How does she handle this reprimand? Is Martha able to relax and enjoy the dinner party or does she stomp out of the room, even more upset with Jesus than with Mary?

My soul stung after “the talk” with Hubby Rick. My guess is that Martha’s soul did not expect Jesus’ response, just as my soul was not anticipating Rick’s reply. As I read Martha’s story, I wanted to reach out, grab her hand and say, “Oh, I so know how you feel, sister!”

I have been 100% Martha nearly all my life. I am in all things a doer. “Being” is rarely part of my day. Repeatedly, I catch myself looking at my watch, trying to figure out how I can squeeze six hours of work into the next three hours. Can I get this week’s sermon finished before making supper? Answer some of the e-mails looming in my inbox? Will there be time to write a blog today? Can I balance the checkbook while ordering a book for next week’s study?

The world needs Martha’s. Martha’s get things done. Martha’s change companies, make churches flourish, have great intentions for their families, and desire to

leave the world a better place than before their tornado of activity arrived. They accomplish more before noon than some people tackle in a week. We admire their commitment and dedication and praise them for their unending bag of tricks.

Living with a Martha can be exhausting. They seldom find daily joy because they are so focused on what is next, they forget to celebrate any big or small win. They never quite feel content. They find it nearly impossible to savor the here and now because they are checking off the next three things they must act on before the end of the day.

Do you ever feel like this? Or is it just me?

Based on the people I interact with, I think there are lots of Martha's in this world. Words like "burnt out," "exhausted," and "stressed" get thrown around like candy at a parade. 'Doing' Martha's find little space to contemplate how a 'being' Mary might live. My life has been filled with endless to-do lists - things that *should* be done. Too often, I am a swirl of commotion that makes people jump out of the way as I come charging through. My efficient, detail-oriented Martha attitude seldom lets the deeply-buried Mary, yearning for quiet and peace, escape her well-hardened shell.

People need space to just "be," without constantly "doing." I speak of this during worship. I have written blogs about this. I have promised myself that, next week, I'll find time to just be. While I accepted this in theory, application usually evaded me. My well-used



car needs an oil change, a tune-up, and a new set of tires... yesterday. It also needs a break.

If you have a hard time saying, “No,” I empathize. When you feel guilty about relaxing rather than tackling one more thing on your to-do list, I know your pain. While contentment and joy often seem unrealistic, they can be in more abundance than many of us experience on a daily basis.

“The talk” brought me back to my need to revisit whether being a Martha 24/7 is best for me, my marriage, my health, and my sanity. I had been toying with the concept of a “Mary Experiment” for a while. I wanted to see if Martha’s like me could add some Mary-ness into their lives. I had tried this before, but this time, I wanted it to be different. This time, I would make it *personal*. I would commit to doing more than just thinking about how to live a Mary Experiment in my life. I would seriously reflect upon my previous life experiences, examine the choices I made, and make myself vulnerable by documenting my journey towards becoming a recovering Martha.

*The Mary Experiment* is my attempt to discover ways to embody more Mary in my life. Did you pick up this book because you are a struggling Martha who longs for a minute of Mary in your life? Consider the words on these pages as part of “the talk” that might encourage you to pursue a little less *doing*, and a little more *being*, in your daily life.

As you read *The Mary Experiment*, I encourage you to make this journey personal. Create your own Mary Experiment. At the end of each chapter, there are reflection questions. Read them and contemplate or journal your answers. Use the free downloadable journal to guide you through your own experiment. Find another person with whom to share your answers. Take time to read this book. Savor the words. Breathe at the end of a difficult sentence. Underline a phrase that catches your attention. Star a favorite paragraph.

As a recovering Martha, I promise to be honest and vulnerable with my experience. I pray something in my story connects with your story. This book does not have a fine-tuned, step-by-step process of how to quickly shift a person's life from running in Martha mode to a more contemplative Mary mode. I have tried this pattern for 40 years and failed miserably every time. This book takes us on a journey of committing to see if making small changes in daily living allows more space to just "be," instead of constantly "doing." My prayer is that through the process, we will find more joy, contentment and peace.

Countless times, I have wished my younger self would have been slightly open to the concept of a Mary Experiment. Delaying my Mary Experiment only delayed the discovery of living a life embracing the values I desired.

Rick's sharp remarks did not ruin our walk that evening. His questions allowed for a more serious

discussion. After “the talk,” did I magically and immediately change everything? Unfortunately, no. I knew that I needed to make changes. It would take time to get where I longed to be. It would involve major revamping. But it was also time.

I yearn to sit around a campfire without making a list in my head of what I should be doing. I dream of enjoying the beautiful wrap-around porch on our house as a Sabbath spot with no guilt or shame. I long to have lunch and walk with my husband several days a week. I pray we can tackle the list of things we yearn to do together.

If you are a doing-Martha who dreams of more joy, contentment, and peace in your life, please join me on this journey. Together, let us explore how we can become recovering Martha's.



**PART 1:**

**The Tension Between  
Martha & Mary**



## CHAPTER 1

### Mary & Martha's Story

*The Lord answered, “Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things. One thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the better part. It won’t be taken away from her.”*

**- Luke 10:41-42 (CEB)**

Early in the process of beginning my Mary Experiment, my Mom passed away. While my siblings and I knew this could happen any time, the timing was profound. I had just decided to take “the talk” to heart. I had pulled the trigger on making significant changes. Yet, as I was attempting to create a true Mary Experiment in my life, my world shifted.

The previous four years had been a whirlwind. I had served two churches on an interim basis. While technically “part-time,” I regularly logged more than full-time hours. I also worked a part-time marketing job. I constantly felt inadequate in trying to juggle these two professional responsibilities.

In the middle of this four-year stint, Hubby Rick and I moved. We purchased a 110-year-old Victorian

farmhouse that needed a complete overhaul. Initially, we moved our possessions into two rooms and “camped” for five months while we updated half of the house. In great Martha fashion, less than 48 hours before a Christmas Open House, dishes found homes in the kitchen cupboards for the first time. Two days later, over 120 people “oohed” and “aahed” at our renovated house. Most did not see the part of the house where one could barely walk.

In those same years, Rick and I provided care for my father-in-law, helped with our grandchildren, continued to remodel our property and transitioned my mom through moves and major downsizing. Meanwhile, we both worked more than full-time jobs. While I felt overwhelmed at the time, I did not believe that I could step back from any of these commitments. I did not want to let anyone down, myself included. My life was a hot mess.

Could I apply the brakes to my 90-miles-an-hour life?

A few weeks after “the talk,” I submitted my resignation to the two churches. I explained my intention of designing a Mary Experiment, which I would document and compile into a book. In sharing my heart’s yearnings with others, I felt committed to follow through with this experiment.

Yet even the best laid plans can be interrupted. A couple weeks after my last day with the churches, my 81-year-old mom’s health changed. She lived in a nursing home. This was not her choice, and happened



only after several cycles of falling, recovering in a nursing home, moving back to an apartment with additional help, and then falling again.

The transition to the nursing home had been difficult. Why? Because my Mom was a Martha. Fiercely independent, she made her own decisions and had spent most of her life taking care of other people. She did not like, nor want, to be dependent upon others, and regularly reminded my siblings and me of this.

It was hard to watch as my mom's body and mind could no longer do the things she willed them to do. After a lifetime of "doing," transitioning to a life of "being" was against her nature. Just before Christmas, she fell again. This time, it was clear her ability to rebound was not possible. My siblings and I implemented steps that would allow Mom to live her last days peacefully, with dignity, and as comfortably as possible. Before she passed away, we had opportunities to say good-bye, and prepare our hearts for life without parents.

On a very snowy January day, we celebrated Mom's life. The surrounding schools had canceled because of significant snowfall the previous evening. My phone received messages from friends opting not to drive several hours in less-than-ideal Wisconsin winter conditions to attend the service. So, I was very surprised when our dear friends Robin and Rhonda walked into the church. They had braved the weather to be with us. Rick and I were overwhelmed with gratitude.

During the service, I shared how my Mom was independent, hard-working, and determined. She was a typical farmwife: sewed our clothes, canned and froze food, and led 4-H. She made lard, cooked down maple syrup, and taught us how to make homemade ice cream. She worked daily on the farm: fed animals, ran farm equipment, and handled the bookwork. As our taxi driver, Mom drove my siblings and me to church, school, 4-H, FFA, and youth activities. Whether it was a sporting event, a concert, a speaking contest, or the fair, Mom seldom missed our activities. Every birthday, she made our choice of special cookies or cupcakes for our entire class. She made thousands of the famous Deaton Santa Claus cookies, each with special decorations and piped frosting. Mom lived her faith in God and was actively involved in a local church.

When our family farm felt the financial squeeze of the early 1980's, Mom worked off the farm to provide more income. Somehow, she still worked on the farm too, and kept up with all her kid's activities. There were many nights she slept very little.

Mom also thought of others. At Christmas, she lovingly baked homemade bread and gave it to the milkman, postman, neighbors, and others. She invited people with no holiday plans to our family celebrations, where they were treated like family.

My mom taught me many, many things. I learned how to juggle multiple commitments and activities. During the memorial service, I was brutally honest when I

shared that Mom had highly influenced my Martha-like tendencies. In fact, my parents had raised four Martha-like children.

After the memorial service, we retreated to the church basement for lunch. Rick and I sat next to Robin and Rhonda. I had not put a forkful of food into my mouth before Rhonda said, "Now I know exactly why you are the way you are. As you spoke about your mom today, I kept thinking that you weren't talking about her. You were talking about yourself."

It can be very hard to hear the most obvious of statements. Rhonda was right. Many traits and habits I embody were learned via osmosis from my mom. It was not easy to tell the difference from Mom's story and my story. Like my mom, I never felt that I had an alternative option. Living as a Martha was just what we did.

Where did my mom learn how to be a Martha? Simply by watching her own mother. I am confident this lifestyle was passed down from generation to generation through my mom's maternal family. It was a foundation of how my ancestors were raised and lived. I was the next woman to carry out these attributes.

Losing my mom cemented the necessity for me to reflect more about my Martha life. While we ate hot sandwiches and ice cream (a favorite of Mom's), the realization of Rhonda's words sunk in. Reflecting

upon wanting more Mary-ness in my life *must* become a high priority.

## **Mary and Martha's Story**

We may call this passage of scripture from Luke's gospel "Martha's story." I could also call this "Ann's story" (my mom's name), or "Dianne's story." Maybe you can call this "My story."

When we call this "Martha's story," we leave out an important component. It is also "Mary's story." According to Jesus, if we only observe Martha's contribution, we drop an important part of the storyline.

As I explored this story with other people, I received a variety of responses. They include:

- The world needs Martha's. Otherwise, who will get anything done?
- What's wrong with being a Martha?
- Shouldn't Jesus have acknowledged all that Martha did for him?
- I know too many Mary's in my life. Someone must be Martha.

For years, I defended my Martha attitude. I felt Martha got a bad rap for being a take-charge woman who was not afraid to get things done. Is this such a bad thing? Don't we encourage our children and grandchildren to dream big and go after their goals?

I often have felt it would be helpful to know more of Martha's situation. Was she a busy-body by choice, or out of necessity? Did someone model this way of living to Martha? Martha's house did not have an electric or gas stove, nor a dishwasher or refrigerator. There wasn't a food processor to mash the garbanzo beans for hummus, or a mixer to incorporate the bread ingredients together. There wasn't a deli to run to for last minute items, or a pizza delivery service when unexpected company showed up. Running a first-century kosher Jewish household took a lot of work, especially if your sister didn't assist.

There is a palpable tension between being 100% Martha and 100% Mary. Neither extreme is best. Having some Martha and some Mary allows us to get things done and change people's lives, while at the same time keeping us close to God's heart and God's will for our lives.

Most people naturally lean towards being either a Martha or a Mary. Moving from one personality (doing vs. being) to the other is not a simple shift. Is it fair to ask a person to change, when maybe this is how they are wired? Do some Martha's become resentful when they want to be a Mary, but feel the opportunity is not available to them?

Should the Martha's of the world deem that embodying some Mary in their lives would be a good idea? Yes, because Jesus told Martha that she was missing the one and most important thing. When we ignore Jesus' calling to live with some Mary in our

lives, we are no different than Ms. Busy-ness Martha herself.

After my mom's death, my friend Kristi sent me a card. She didn't know Mom. Yet, her words accurately described her:

*Like most of our moms, I'm sure she also secretly wore a Wonder Woman costume every day with everything she could get accomplished in a single bound. From taking care of the family, helping on the farm, being involved in the community, and at the end of the day, have a fabulous meal prepared. She had to be so proud of the strong, caring woman you have become and the ease at which you can do so many things in a professional way. I hope you are at peace and the memories you share with family and friends help you through this difficult time.*

Huge tears rolled down my cheeks as I read Kristi's words. She captured my mom so clearly. She also accurately articulated the internal struggle I feel every day.

Finding an appropriate mix between Martha and Mary-ness seems to be a crux for many people. How can the Martha's of the world empower their lives for Mary moments? Can Martha's allow themselves to move towards Mary-ness, while still keeping the admirable aspects of their personalities?

Altering my story to include more Mary moments in my life began with making the commitment to myself that I *wanted* to change my story. In my head, I knew that I was missing out on the one and most important thing in my life. Lip service to change my priorities would not be enough. This could no longer be something I “should do.”

Shifting my life would require making hard choices in my heart. If I wanted to write a different ending to the story I was living, I needed to choose whether action would happen. Was I willing to take small, significant steps and change the deep-seeded Martha tendencies in my life? Would I be able to release control of the many things I “do” and allow myself opportunities to “be?”

How do you want your story to end? Are you content with the current status of Martha and Mary mix in your life? Or, do you yearn for something different? Have you allowed yourself to embrace the one and important thing in your life?

### **Reflection Questions:**

1. Who is someone that has modeled Martha-like tendencies for you? How do you specifically see their influence in how you live your life?
2. Ask a trusted friend to identify your Martha and Mary tendencies. When are your Martha attitudes helpful? When are they challenging? How have you incorporated Mary's attitude into your life?
3. Do you struggle with Mary's lack of help to Martha in this story? If so, what bothers you the most about this?

### **Prayer:**

Dear God – You have designed each one of us in a powerfully unique and special way. While You call each one of us Your Own, no two of us are alike. Thank you for creating us to each be our own special person. Thank you for bringing powerful role models into our lives. May we not be afraid to continue to be molded and shaped by You. Amen.