

LISA HARPER

LIFE

An Obsessively
Grateful, Undone
by Jesus, Genuinely
Happy, and Not
Faking it Through
the Hard Stuff
Kind of

100-DAY DEVOTIONAL

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*I dedicate this to my daughter, Melissa Price Harper, who is tangible,
giggling, dancing, singing proof that our God is a Redeemer.*

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Day 1

WILL THE REAL HAPPY PLEASE STAND UP?

*Happy the poor in spirit—because theirs is
the reign of the heavens. MATTHEW 5:3 YLT*

HERE'S THE DEAL: YOU are going to be introduced to some real-life stories you'll surely resonate with in this devotional, as well as some wildly embarrassing ones that I hope you haven't had to deal with personally! Which means, sometimes you'll be turning these pages thinking, *Mmm hmm, I totally get that.* While other times you'll probably be reading along thinking, *This chick ain't right!* and may even find yourself chuckling at the blooper reel chapters in my story. And I'm all for that. I mean it. *Sign me up.* If you know me at all, you know I'm all about experiencing joy with God and each other in this crazy beautiful journey we call life—in the small moments, the big moments, the quiet moments, the loud moments, the bright moments, the dark moments. You get it. In *all the life-moments*. However, by the time you're a few devos deep into this darling (I can say that since I didn't have anything to do with the design!) pink book, you may find yourself wondering, *Why is happiness such a major theme?*

So let's start somewhere *super*-original and cutting-edge. Yes, I'm talking about the modern and wildly innovative world-wonder known as the dictionary. Good old Webster defines happy as: *characterized by or indicative of pleasure, contentment, or joy.*¹

Though definitions are helpful, my instincts tell me you probably didn't need one on the concept of *happy*. Why? Because you are already familiar with it. The word itself immediately conjures up idyllic images or memories in our minds, doesn't it? Like a toddler in overalls splashing through puddles while gleefully chasing a frog. Or a couple of kindergartners sitting elbow to elbow at a picnic table both wearing gap-toothed grins and holding slices of watermelon bigger than their heads. Or a bright-eyed cheerleader who's catapulted high in the air with her arms over her head in victory when the home team scores the winning

touchdown. *Happy*. It sounds like fireworks, smells like roasted marshmallows, and feels like cannon-balling into a cold pool on a hot day, right?

What it does *not* seem to be, to some of us, is allowable for Christians. Surely *happy* is too based on our circumstances, too emotive, too . . . well, too *unspiritual* to be an appropriate and consistent state for Christ-followers, right?

Wrong.

Wildly, sadly, distorted-by-religious-Pharisees-for-far-too-long WRONG.

There are actually thirty-seven references to “happy” in the Old Testament and forty-eight in the New Testament. Did you know that there are more than 2,700 passages where terms related to happy—*gladness, merriment, pleasure, celebration, cheer, laughter, delight, jubilation* and *feasting*—are used?² In fact, the Psalms—the book smack-dab in the middle of the Bible and comprised of 150 Old Testament *songs*³—literally begins with the word *happy*! See for yourself:

Happy are those who don't listen to the wicked, who don't go where sinners go, who don't do what evil people do. They love the LORD's teachings, and they think about those teachings day and night. They are strong, like a tree planted by a river. The tree produces fruit in season, and its leaves don't die. Everything they do will succeed. (Ps. 1:1–3 NCV, emphasis mine)

While most of the translations of the Bible render this term as *blessed*—which admittedly has a more old-school, shiny wooden pew ring to it—super-smart scholarly people who are familiar with the grammar and syntax of original biblical manuscripts (folks like the awesome professors at Denver Seminary who are currently half-dragging me up the steep hill of their doctoral program!) assure us that the term *happy* is every bit as correct!⁴

And let's not stop at the Psalms. Let's talk about how Jesus Himself used the concept of “happy.” We don't have to look any further than the Beatitudes—arguably Jesus' most beloved message—which could accurately be titled “How to Be Happy” since the whole thing technically begins with the word *happy* as well. Once again, theological experts who've immersed themselves in the Hebrew, Greek, and Aramaic of biblical lexicon assert that “happy” (which in scriptural context is about the consistent joy that comes with trusting in God's

faithfulness as opposed to the momentary enjoyment of present circumstances) is a perfectly sound substitutional term for “blessed” or “fortunate” here.⁵

That means *happy* is a wonderfully legitimate outward sign of Christians who are walking with God and enjoying all the inward graces He gives us. In other words, happiness is the joyful fruit of someone who is deeply rooted in their relationship with God . . . it’s the outer disposition of a God-lover’s inward reality . . . a covenant “state of being” for His people. Of course, that doesn’t mean we won’t have hard days—frankly, Jesus proclaims that we *will* most assuredly have hard days (John 16:33), but He also assures us there’s no need to worry because He’ll be with us every step of the way! The bottom line is, happiness isn’t silly or unspiritual for Christ-followers but is actually a sacred, celebratory, and I daresay *necessary* aspect of our walk of faith. Break out those party poppers, y’all—because happiness isn’t simply a *possibility* for believers; it’s God’s lavish and oh-so-accessible gift to help us live and love well in a world that’s often less than kind.


My sincere hope is that you’ll find your spiritual happiness increasing as you flip through these pages. God has taught me so much in every moment of life—from the lowest valley to the highest pinnacle. And at this middle-aged point, when I look back and realize that I’ve lived more life than I have life left to enjoy, I can promise you that I’ve never experienced God’s absence. Not once. Whether I was laughing so hard there were tears running down my face or grieving so deeply that I ran out of tears, I can trace His sovereign, steadfast compassion through every single season. I firmly believe you’ll find our Creator-Redeemer to be perfectly faithful and compassionate in the highs and lows of your life, too. So let’s dive into this devotional and run hard toward Jesus together, knowing we’ll inevitably share some pratfalls and belly laughs along the way!

- **WHEN’S THE LAST** time someone described you as happy?
- **HAVE YOU EVER** thought about happiness as being a sacred thing, in both the hard and the good times? Why or why not?
- **HOW CAN YOUR** external disposition better reveal your internal relationship with God?

Day 2

LAUGHTER REALLY IS GOOD MEDICINE

May all those who seek you be happy and rejoice in you. PSALM 40:16 NET



ONE OF MY DEAR friends, Sheila Walsh, and I were invited to walk the red carpet a few years ago for the premiere of another friend's movie. But don't picture the typical red-carpet events that you've seen on television or in magazines! Imagine more of a burgundy indoor/outdoor-polypropylene-floor-covering kind of thing taking place at a multiplex in the suburbs next to several fast-food restaurants. Suffice it to say, we were tickled before we even got there.

Sheila's husband, Barry, chauffeured us to the event since we weren't sure we could walk—much less drive—in our snug, fancy dresses. We parked at the edge of the lot so we'd have privacy to make any necessary hair and makeup adjustments before facing the swelling crowd of eight or nine people who'd gathered to meet us. While the place he parked was private, it was also (unknownst to us) next to a grassy median that was soggy from recent rain. You can probably pick up on where this story is going. When Sheila lifted her gold silk skirt and stepped gracefully out of the car onto the adjacent turf, her 4-inch heels were immediately sucked into the mud, rendering her flailing and stuck like a stork in quicksand.

I sprang into action, heroically yelling for her to hang on while I attempted to squeeze myself out of the backseat of Barry's claustrophobic, two-door sports car that was obviously designed by sadists. Two broken fingernails and one snagged sleeve later, I finally emerged to be Sheila's saving grace, but as soon as I grabbed her arm to pull her to dry land, the heels of my shoes pierced through the muck too, effectively pinning me in place right beside her. We grabbed each other frantically, like two sailors who know their ship is going down fast and realize they've missed the opportunity to jump overboard.

As we toppled over in an ungainly heap, I really had no option but to fall squarely on top of my more petite pal. After much futile slipping and sliding, we began laughing hysterically and momentarily lost the ability to stand, even had we been able to find some leverage. This is the point in the story when,

from somewhere underneath me, Sheila squeaked, “Help me, I’m peeing and I can’t stop!”

Our recent “peetastrophe” was an effective reminder that, whether we’re braving a red carpet premiere night or an ordinary weekday morning, the ability to laugh at ourselves is a key component to personal happiness.


Sometimes God does it through funny moments we share with friends. Other times He does it through intimate moments shared only with Him. He even does it through hard situations, in moments we wouldn’t expect. But regardless of how He does it, God promises laughter and joy to all of His kids, even the leaky ones!

- **WHEN IS THE** last time you laughed so hard, you leaked?
- **IN WHAT AREAS** of life could you stand to take things just a little less seriously?
- **AT WHAT POINT** in your own story have you seen God give you laughter as a means to bravely walk through a difficult situation?

Day 3

WHEN YOUR SPIRITUAL TUTOR IS A TOILET

For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. ROMANS 8:38–39



INDOOR PLUMBING WAS A luxury in the Haitian village where my adopted daughter, Missy (full name Melissa), grew up. And soft, two-ply toilet paper? Even rarer. So, as you can imagine, when I finally brought her home to Tennessee, toilet flushing in our house with copious amounts of Charmin quickly became one of her favorite pastimes. Early on, as I observed the wide-eyed delight she displayed while watching massive plumes of paper spiral downward, my first thought was, “Isn’t that just darling?” I wasn’t even bothered when I had to call the plumber the first few times. But after a while, wading through ankle-deep wastewater in my bathroom (for some reason, she’s partial to mine and has never once flooded the facilities in hers) and writing large checks to repairmen lost its allure.

I gave her cheerful lectures regarding the benefits of judicious toilet paper consumption. After that ceased to dissuade her from sending an entire forest down the drain during one particularly energetic (and unsupervised) potty episode, I grew more creative in my water-the-floor-no-more campaign and made up this catchy tune: “Five squares is where it’s at, only moms need more’n ’dat. Tissue wads are so not cool, use single strips on the stool!”

Surely that would work, right?

Nope.

After various winsome strategies failed and my bathroom floors showed signs of warping, I employed more punitive consequences for her messy infractions. I limited iPad usage and confiscated one of her favorite Paw Patrol figurines. But nothing seemed to stem the tide.

Some months later, I was at my wit’s end—to put it mildly—when I walked into my bathroom, past my innocent-looking daughter taking a bubble bath (she also likes my bathtub more than hers because it’s bigger and “splashier”),

and slipped on wet tile. It didn't take me long to discover water gushing out of the commode like Niagara Falls. After a heavy sigh I morphed into the put-upon persona my mother used when I did something especially naughty as a child:

Doggone it, Melissa, HOW MANY TIMES DO I HAVE TO TELL YOU that You. Do. Not. Use. Giant. Gobs. Of. Toilet. Paper. Like. This? Dadgummit, I. Am. So. Tired. Of. This, Missy! Why didn't you tell me you'd stopped up the toilet again and water was all over the floor?

The entire time I was plunging and fussing and mopping up that yucky pond with beach towels, I had my back to Missy. Within a minute or two—after my irritability had subsided enough to realize she hadn't responded to my questions—I turned around and was immediately convicted by the sight of my precious little girl sitting ramrod straight and staring at me mournfully as big tears streamed down her beautiful cheeks. I had all but crushed her spirit over something innocent and insignificant. She wasn't *trying* to cause a mess. She was still learning, still adjusting to a new life here. To having an indoor *toilet*, for crying out loud. She hadn't been willfully disobedient or disrespectful, so it wasn't a heart or character issue. It was a plumbing issue.

Losing my cool over something so minor prompted me to slide to my knees and thank God for being an altogether different kind of Dad. One who never turns His back on us despite our proclivity to make huge messes!

- **WHAT'S THE MESSIEST** thing you've done lately that our heavenly Father unexpectedly showed you grace and kindness over?
- **DID YOU REMEMBER** to thank Him for lavishing you with grace instead of lecturing you irritably?
- **WHO IN YOUR** life needs to hear that, because of Jesus, they don't need to fear God's anger over their messes? Are you living like this reality is true?

Day 4

NO MORE BARRIERS

When the angels had left them and returned to heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let's go straight to Bethlehem and see what has happened, which the Lord has made known to us." They hurried off and found both Mary and Joseph, and the baby who was lying in the manger. After seeing them, they reported the message they were told about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. But Mary was treasuring up all these things in her heart and meditating on them. LUKE 2:15-19

— . . . —

SINCE I FILLED YOU in on mine and Missy's adventure in potty training (and all the toilet paper that came with it), I may as well fill you in on April 14, 2014—another adventurous day in our history, and one I consider the second most important day in my life (second only to the day I met Jesus). Why? Because it's the day I brought Missy home from Haiti.

Because of Haiti's proximity to the US—it's only about a 90-minute flight from Miami—I had the privilege of visiting Missy multiple times during our two-year adoption process. Unlike some of my friends who've adopted from distant countries like China, Africa, or Russia, and didn't get to meet their kids until they traveled to their birth country to bring them home at the very end of the adoption process, Missy and I had the opportunity to spend two, three and even four days at a time together before our adoption was finalized. She'd even gotten into the habit of calling me "mama blan" (which means white mama in Creole), but since she associated me with short visits and presents, I think what she really meant by mama was "Santa with wider hips!" And since we had the blessing of establishing some semblance of relationship over the twenty-four months prior to April 14, 2014, I wasn't expecting such a huge shift to take place in my heart on our "Gotcha Day" (the day she actually came home to Tennessee). I mean, I knew that finally getting to bring her home was going to be *significant* . . . I just didn't know it was going to be *seismic*.

I can remember almost every detail of that day. The way she grabbed my hand and her eyes got really wide when the plane began to taxi toward takeoff in Port-au-Prince. The relief that washed over me when we stepped off the plane in Miami, on US soil for the first time. The way she giggled and wiggled

in the long line at Customs. The peace that kept me grounded while it was taking so long for our paperwork to get processed in the Homeland Security and Immigration office that it looked like we were going to miss our connecting flight home to Nashville. The way she fell asleep on my lap once we finally made it on board and got settled into the back of that tiny plane. I can vividly remember the way we could hear our welcome home crowd cheering after we got off the plane in Nashville and began to walk toward baggage claim. We could hear them *long* before we could see them! I remember the way a famous country music star walking near us arrogantly assumed the boisterous crowd was cheering for him only to be shocked when they completely ignored him and his entourage because they only had eyes for a sweaty middle-aged mom and her newly adopted four-year-old.

But what I remember *most*—the memory that’s the absolute highlight in an entire day of highlights—is the way I felt that first night at home, sitting on the bed next to her after she’d fallen asleep from sheer exhaustion. I remember being so overwhelmed with love for this little thirty-four-pound peanut that I had the literal, physical sensation of my chest expanding. The feelings of love and joy and gratitude and fulfillment were so big and so visceral, I felt like my ribs had to move over and make room.

I realized later that our first night at home was the first time there was no barrier between us. No reality that I had to leave her in the orphanage and fly back to America. No potential of yet another adoption delay. Nobody translating English to her or Creole to me. No lost Internet connection. Not even a dear friend holding a welcome sign or fervently praying. It was just the two of us. That’s when the profound gift of parenthood matured from conceptual to concrete. From my longing for a child to a little girl under a Pottery Barn duvet whose eyelids fluttered while she dreamed and beautiful brown skin that smelled like cinnamon and coffee. Watching my daughter sleep that first night is among the purest, truest things I’ve ever experienced.

And Jesus’ incarnation—when He left His celestial home and came to the world He created as God in the flesh—is infinitely better than that first night I experienced with Missy in our home. It’s the moment the barrier between heaven and earth—between God and His people—dissipated. There in the wide-eyed wonder of a teenaged mom named Mary—who had a much more

unconventional experience when it came to becoming a mom than I did!—we see the miracle of *God with us* begin to unfold.

- **DO YOU TEND** to be more of a concrete thinker or a creative processor?
- **HOW OFTEN DO** you ponder the miracle of an accessible Savior—that we can intimately know Jesus?
- **WHY DO YOU** sometimes forget that there's no barrier between you and God anymore? How might life be different for you if you approached God with the confidence that there are no more boundaries between the two of you, and that He delights over you, even as you sleep?

Day 5

REFUSE THE STARRING ROLE

For by the grace given to me, I tell everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he should think. Instead, think sensibly, as God has distributed a measure of faith to each one. . . . Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud; instead, associate with the humble. Do not be wise in your own estimation. ROMANS 12:3, 16

CAN WE ALL JUST agree that social media is rife with both blessings *and* difficulty? I once had the misfortune of wounding the pride of a female acquaintance when I neglected to give her the shout-out she felt she deserved on a certain social media platform. I only know this because, after noticing an effusive public post I'd made about another person I dearly love, she felt the need to share her disappointment with a mutual friend, who then shared it with me. Or, in short, you know, the grapevine. Mind you, I had called *and* texted personal congratulatory messages to the offended girl. But nonetheless, since I hadn't made the praise "public," she felt slighted. Sometimes I think pride masquerades as insecurity, which may be less offensive initially than a boisterous, noticeably big ego, but it's still fruit from the same self-focused tree. It's still all about us . . . it's just narcissism in a nicer outfit.

Speaking of being me-focused, I would be remiss if I made you think that gal is alone in her struggles. While mine isn't typically tricked out of hiding by perceived slights on social media, I've got my own nasty versions of self-centered insecurity and shame. And trust me, they definitely make themselves known on a regular basis! Like a few months ago when a Christian gentleman with whom I thought I had a real connection with on our first blind date never called again and told the person who'd set us up that he wasn't attracted to me, plus was put off by the fact that I came with the "baggage" of an HIV+ daughter. His barb not only sent me reeling to the dark chocolate cubby in the pantry, it convinced me to trudge down the path of self-pity. I wound up spending way too much emotional energy analyzing my unattractive parts (Missy not included—that joker was DEAD WRONG with that part of it. I may or may not have prayed for him to be trapped in a small room filled with hundreds of howler monkeys

who were infected with irritable bowel syndrome for dismissing my baby girl as “baggage”) and wondering what I could’ve done to be more alluring.

The bottom line is this: one less-than-flattering opinion about me from a balding man I only spent two hours with derailed my mind and heart from focusing on Jesus for at least ten times that many hours afterward. That’s the real danger of pride-disguised-as-insecurity—it kidnaps us from living securely and abundantly based on the unconditional love Christ has lavished upon us, muffin top or not. And it embezzles time and energy we could’ve used to attend to lost and broken people around us. It bleeds us of the peace Jesus died to provide and it robs the world of the salt, light, and compassion His followers are called to provide. We weren’t meant to spend time and mental energy and emotional output on how we stack up in the eyes of others, whether that be on social media or on a date or wherever it is for you. Instead of insecurity and pride, we all need to be reminded to instead pursue what St. Augustine called the three greatest characteristics of a Christian: “Humility, humility, humility.”

- **WHEN DOES PRIDE-DISGUISED-AS-INSECURITY** tend to rear its ugly head in your life?
- **WHY DO YOU** think you struggle in this particular situation so often? What do you think is being taken from you?
- **WHAT DOES THE** pursuit of humility look like for you in this season of life?

Day 6

FIFTY-DOLLAR WORDS AND FIFTY-CENT FAITH

YOU MAY NOT KNOW this, but deep down, I'm a total nerd. I geek out on all things theological, which means it didn't take me long after undergrad to realize I'd probably *really, really* like seminary (schools for theology lovers). Now, don't get me wrong, I don't think this means I have to be a crusty old dinosaur hidden away in some basement library, away from real people and real-life issues. I like things down here in the real world, so I'm not planning on hiking up an ivory tower to set up shop any time soon!

Anyway, one of my favorite lecture series during my first seminary stint in a master's program was about having a "high view" of God. The main text our professor taught from was the following passage in Isaiah 6:1–8:

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord seated on a high and lofty throne, and the hem of his robe filled the temple. Seraphim were standing above him; they each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. And one called to another:

Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of Armies;
his glory fills the whole earth.

The foundations of the doorways shook at the sound of their voices, and the temple was filled with smoke.

Then I said:

Woe is me for I am ruined
because I am a man of unclean lips
and live among a people of unclean lips,
and because my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of
Armies.

Then one of the seraphim flew to me, and in his hand was a glowing coal that he had taken from the altar with tongs. He touched my mouth with it and said:

Now that this has touched your lips,
your iniquity is removed
and your sin is atoned for.
Then I heard the voice of the Lord asking:
Who will I send?
Who will go for us?
I said:
Here I am. Send me.

You should have heard the lively discussions we had in class. The gist was this: in our quest to make the Gospel “relevant” to teenagers and unbelievers, we’ve all but lost the kind of awed reverence Isaiah displayed toward God. In our bumper-sticker-theology and God-is-my-copilot kind of culture, we’ve unwittingly minimized just how powerful and perfect and righteous the Alpha and Omega is. In our attempt to make Him more accessible, we sometimes lower our view of Him to nothing more than a buddy or self-help guru. I remember being convicted during that class that I didn’t revere God the way I should. So I committed to be more careful in how I addressed Him in prayer and handled His Word. *I’m going to regard my Bible as a precious treasure instead of carelessly shoving it into a suitcase or tossing into the back seat of the car on a road trip. I’m going to give God the awe and respect He deserves!* And I still hold to those convictions.

However, as I look back over my walk of faith in the twenty years since then, it’s clear that I sometimes overcorrected, ending up in the opposite ditch. In my sincere attempts to hold a high view of God, I made the mistake of assuming I had to hold a low view of myself. I began to teach Bible studies about “awe deprivation”—about the danger of having an anemic view of God. I also loved to quote the Latin phrase, *mysterium tremendum* (tremendous mystery), which I gleaned from one of my faith heroes, A. W. Tozer. In God’s tremendous mystery, we should be confronted by God’s greatness and in turn, be brought low. I also began weaving the word *depravity* into my testimony story, ensuring everyone knew I was saved purely by grace from a sinful pit I’d dug myself, and that I deserved death because of my transgressions.

It all sounded really lofty and academic to me at the time. And the truth is, a lot of that stuff isn’t wrong. Sometimes we *do* have too casual a view of God. Sometimes we *should* stand in awe at God’s mysteriousness. And we *are* saved

by grace. But here's the problem: none of this means we should view ourselves as if God didn't delight in creating us! I didn't have the spiritual maturity back then to understand what I know now—namely, that having a truly high view of God *doesn't* result in having a low, degrading opinion of ourselves. Instead, having a high view of God opens the believer's heart and mind to what God says about us, His beloved children. Yes, apart from Him we're wicked and depraved, but after we put our faith and hope in Jesus Christ, we're allowed to shrug into His robes of righteousness and are adopted into the family of God as full heirs!

In Christ, our Father doesn't see us as worthless or dirty or depraved. He sees us as chosen, and righteous, and clean, and loved and a million other very happy things. Look in the mirror, friend. God wanted to save that person you see. He loves that person you see. He died for that person you see. If He has this loving view of you, why should you view yourself any differently?

- **WHERE WOULD YOU** put yourself on a "View of God" scale—with 1 being "I might believe in a higher power" and 10 being "I am so overjoyed by what Christ has done for me that I'm compelled to get on my knees and worship"?
- **WHERE WOULD YOU** put yourself on a "View of Self" scale—with 1 being self-hatred or narcissism and 10 being "I believe all the things God says about me are true!"?
- **IF YOU AREN'T** sure how God feels about you, what Christian in your life could you ask to help you be sure? On the flip side, if you're a Christian, who in your life needs reminding of how God truly feels about them?

Do you ever wonder if the Gospel is truly “good news” for your actual, everyday, often difficult, sometimes painful, and typically crazy real life?

Well, it is. But sometimes we all need a reminder that God’s faithfulness really does follow us into the face of all that harried, hard, and even humorous stuff of life. This gut-level exploration of pertinent and redemptive moments in Scripture proves that God’s grace is more than sufficient for both the massive and the minuscule things of life.



LISA HARPER is an engaging, hilarious communicator as well as an authentic and substantive Bible teacher that many enjoy hearing in person, or on countless TV and radio platforms. She holds a Master of Theological Studies from Covenant Seminary, and a doctorate-in-progress at Denver Seminary. She’s been in vocational ministry for thirty years and has written nineteen books and Bible study curriculums but says her greatest accomplishment by far is that of becoming Missy’s (her adopted daughter from Haiti) mama! They live on a hilly farmette south of Nashville, Tennessee, where they enjoy eating copious amounts of chips, queso, and guacamole.

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