

KAREN STILLER

HOLINESS

HERE



Searching for God in the
Ordinary Events of Everyday Life

Karen Stiller's always beautiful, always poignant writing invites us to reexamine the seeming ordinariness of our daily lives with new eyes cleansed by tears and in search of hope. From reveries to realities, from hospitality to humility, from giving away to growing up—Stiller pays sacred attention to what has lost our attention and, in doing so, shows us that holiness is here, in lament and in joy, in complaint and in praise. Holiness is our reflection of the divine image in each of us as we strive to discover our truest selves: beings who are beloved and therefore able to love deeply from that first love. Sit with Stiller's book and be still: Holy, holy, holy is this Lord Almighty, indeed.

DR. CAROLYN WEBER, professor at New College Franklin and award-winning author of *Holy Is the Day*, *Sex and the City of God*, and *Surprised by Oxford*, now a feature film

Karen Stiller has given us a remarkable gift in the pages of this book. She has dusted off an old, theological word that can be loaded with misconceptions at best and shame at worst and has polished it into a beautiful diamond of an invitation to pursue a ragged and rough and incomplete holiness in the everyday. In doing so, she has become a trusted and wise companion to all of us. What warmth, insight, vulnerability, and understanding you will encounter in *Holiness Here*. This book has changed my understanding and pursuit of holiness.

JEFF CROSBY, author of *The Language of the Soul: Meeting God in the Longings of Our Hearts*

“Holiness is and holiness does.” This is the simple yet profound message of this lovely book. With warmth and wit, Stiller assures us that holiness is not just for the starched and neatly pressed saints. Holiness is for the saints who sleep late, stand in the back

of the sanctuary, even weep in the valley of the shadow of death. There are few people I'd trust to tell the down-to-earth truth about holiness—and Karen Stiller is one. I recommend this book highly.

JEN POLLOCK MICHEL, author and speaker

Holiness is a word with gravitas, one I associate with imposing cathedrals, confusing rituals, and formally dressed clergy with unapproachable demeanors. Yet God calls *us* to be holy, you and me. In *Holiness Here* Karen Stiller brings this theological invitation back down to earth, fitting holiness into the spaces between annoying neighbors and messy children, city parks and homemade ginger cookies. If you've felt intimidated by the idea of holiness, I invite you to take a deep breath and pick up this lovely, accessible book.

CATHERINE MCNIEL, author of *Fearing Bravely: Risking Love for Our Neighbors, Strangers, and Enemies*

Both challenging and inspiring, this book paints an earthy picture of holiness that you can feel, see, and touch. If spiritual growth sounds, well, too spiritual, Karen shows us how holiness can be found in our reaction to a lost woman on our doorstep; in a big pot of soup that nourishes a weary friend; in comforting a scared child. In this beautiful prose that will make holiness seem a joy rather than a burden, you'll find relief from pretension woven in with the comfort that we can see God, and be his hands and feet, even in the ordinary.

SHEILA WRAY GREGOIRE, author and podcaster at *Bare Marriage*

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NavPress 

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To our children:

*Erik, Holly, and Thomas, who helped us grow
in holiness because of all the love.*

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SEARCHING FOR HOLINESS

OUR NEIGHBORHOOD PARK is a city block long and sits across the street from both a coffee shop and the busiest place to buy beer in Centretown, our old and creaky part of the city. I love to walk through it. Dundonald Park on Somerset Street East is hard and soft. Drugs are pushed there, I am sure of it, and so are laughing children on the swing set.

“Is this a good neighborhood?” my mother-in-law asked me.

“Not really,” I said.

On her first visit after our move from a suburb to the downtown core, my mother-in-law could clearly see the inner-city mix and match, the falling apart and the building anew, what some people say is good and others think is bad.

Early on a September Sunday afternoon, I came upon a worship

service unfolding in one corner of the park. The pastor wore jeans and a purple T-shirt emblazoned with *Blessed*. He preached to a congregation of twenty or so gathered before him, some on lawn chairs as if it were a picnic. Other people lay on the grass or found a spot on a bench within preaching distance, like I did. A loose dog roamed around the perimeter of the group sniffing grass and people, looking menacing in his leather-studded collar. I tucked Dewey, our doodle, under the park bench, just in case.

“We are butterflies,” said the preacher. “Transformation is a process.”

A shouting match erupted between two women, one who loved the loose dog and another who feared him. One woman shooed him. The other woman took offense. The congregation watched. The preacher’s voice grew louder. “Jesus Christ will transform the people in this park and then the neighborhood,” he said-yelled. “‘Take me as I am.’ That’s what we are to pray.”

Because I was married to a preacher, I was predisposed to cheer preachers on and wish them the absolute best. *This poor guy*.

It got worse. A man joined the ruckus, sitting on the grass with his legs stretched out, right at the preacher’s feet. “You’re really doing a great job transforming people,” he called out. “What a joke.”

My pastor husband, Brent, had been heckled before—by a pillar of the community gone rogue on a Sunday morning in a small-town, stained-glass church. The angry parishioner accused Brent of being a fake Anglican because he played his guitar during worship and was preaching about tithing, that ancient practice of Christians giving a percentage of their income to their churches.

“Anglicans don’t tithe!” he called out. Sermon heckling always startles, whether it’s in a church or in a park.

The park preacher soldiered on. “We can pray, ‘Change me!

Renew me!’ God’s Kingdom is one of light and love, justice and mercy.” He took a deep breath. “And now we’re going to break into small groups.”

The man on the grass carried on. “They sing songs no one knows. I never heard any of these songs. They suck.”

The preacher wandered, sharing what I assume were words of encouragement to his flock. The man at the front muttered. Communion broke out, much less formally than we do it at our church with our silver goblets and squares of white linen ironed flat. Here, it was tiny little plastic cups and wafers passed hand to hand. The bread and the cup still stand for the holiest of lives given and received, whether it’s a formal moment in a cathedral or a sprawled-out picnic in a park.

The sacrament eventually reached the man on the grass.

I expected him to refuse the bread and body. I thought he would decline the wine and blood, these symbols of old to new, the forgiveness and restoration captured in the most ordinary of objects, a cup and a cracker. I assumed he would want no part of what disappointed him so: the roaming dog and yelling women, the songs that sucked, and the pastor who could not force transformation on anyone this particular Sunday. He was a critic who would never partake, on principle.

But he surprised me. He reached up and accepted the cup and wafer from the pastor’s outstretched hands. Then the man wept. He cried like a baby right there on the grass and ate what was offered and drank what was given. The man appeared torn asunder. The pastor knelt down beside him, held him in his arms, and tried to pat him back together.

I nudged Dewey awake and walked home, not wanting to be a voyeur. In my neighborhood park I had stumbled upon the most holy thing I had witnessed in a while.



It is true that we are butterflies—light as feathers, pretty as prayer books. But butterflies, of course, aren't always so gorgeous, and the way to become a butterfly isn't all sweetness and light. You would never guess, until you learn it in second grade, what damp, papery places butterflies come from, what struggle and toil and undignified stages such elegant beauty pushes through. Becoming their new selves takes work and rest, muck and guck, and a safe spot in which to transform until the moment they burst forth with those fabulous wings. They look like an overnight success, but the toil was long and the labor was great.

It is a wonder to learn, as children, what muster and might goes into the art of butterfly making. “Look!” we cry out when we see one. We sense we are watching a flying, flitting miracle when a monarch flutters past. It is all an amazement: the stubby caterpillar, the weird word *pupa*, the chrysalis that is the cage where tissues and limbs and organs stretch and grow, and then, of course, the rebirth into new life, which is where we all want to land.

Transformation is a process. The man on the grass was probably right with all his complaints. The songs here suck. We yell at each other. Everyone else, plus their dogs and especially their cats, can be awful.

But we can be free like a butterfly, the preacher said, a living miracle perched on a leaf, cheering things up.



Some of us can stick a pin in our life map to mark the moment we became a butterfly. The moment we were made new clearly and dramatically, practically overnight. For others of us, our journey

to Jesus is a bit blurrier and stretched out. No matter how it happened exactly, we have been changed and are changing still: Jesus made us holy.

We just don't always live or love that way. Our inner transformation from slug to songbird will not always be evident to the people we honk at, and surely not evident to ourselves. We underestimate our own transformation every day by how we act, or choose not to act.

We have been made holy, and we have been tasked to act that way, to live into who we have been told we are.

This is not always easy.



“This is where your mother and I will be buried,” my dad said, his arm waving over a patch of grass near the far edge of the Miners Cemetery in Malagash. It was hot, in that dry, dead way a day can be with insect buzz hanging in the air (and why didn't you bring water along?). The grass crunched under our feet.

I have noticed that the older parents get, the easier they cry, the less they sleep, and the more freely they discuss burial plots. The fathers topple off ladders until you finally convince them to stop climbing them. I moved my elderly dad along in conversation and away from that spot in the small graveyard just down the road from their house.

“This is my friend,” he said, pausing at a black granite headstone etched with a single leaping deer.

It was the grave of a German immigrant who had kept mostly to himself after he settled in this tiny corner of rural Nova Scotia. This is a wooded, ocean place where you buy lobsters from the wharf, wine from the vineyard, and milk and flour at an overpriced

store in the village. But it's not Martha's Vineyard, or anything like that. Black bears wander. White paint peels. We collect old buoys off the beach that the tides bring in and hang them off our trees.

Here, it is possible to keep to yourself and mind your own beeswax. Dad was an elder in the teeny, tiny church, and this man's name was on Dad's visitation list. Every few months, my father would grab a pile of their church's newsletter, *The Gabriel*, and drive around the peninsula checking in on folks.

"You can come, but don't you come before eleven," the man had warned my dad. But then Dad stood outside the man's house at ten forty-five one day and thought he'd ring the bell anyway. The door opened a small, suspicious crack, and there was the angry eye of the man in his bathrobe. He reminded Dad about visiting hours like an outraged nurse. Dad left and drove around wasting a bit of time in the sunshine. Then he drove back.

"What happened?" I asked, amazed.

"He said, 'Oh, hi, Russ,' and let me in," said Dad. "We sat in his living room and had a great visit. And neither of us ever brought it up again."

Graveyards are full of hard marble edges, but this story softened the whole place for me. To go back the same day you were shut out and not mention the injury or the embarrassment, but to instead have coffee with cream, is holy. It is so very useful. How easy it would be to storm off with your *Gabriels* and go straight back home to play bocce in the backyard.

Holiness can be daily, ho-hum work. It is often ordinary and right there in front of us. Holiness can have a touch of the monotonous. It might feel boring and invisible, like we are trudging forward and not actually flitting about like a butterfly or being any kind of world changer at all. The reward of holiness might not be obvious to us.

Even still, the opportunities to do the tiny, holy things are right there at our fingertips. We can choose to act like Jesus and not like a big baby, much as we might want to.



I am a big baby, and our house is an old semi-detached lady with good bones but sagging skin. Her walls are thin. On a recent Friday night, I went to bed early. Our neighbors stayed up late. Just on the other side of our bedroom wall, these lovely people listened to music and walked an elephant around until well past four in the morning.

I had planned an idyllic Saturday of writing, so for most of the night, I lay in bed awake with the knowledge that the entire universe had organized itself against me. I finally hauled myself up at eight to gulp down an Americano and try anyway. But first I stood as close to our shared wall as possible and jumped up and down three times on our creaky hardwood floor, as high and hard as in fourth-grade gym class. Then I slammed the bathroom door like a teenager, in case the jumping hadn't worked.

I did write a few paragraphs, but then surrendered to my fatigue and closed my laptop. Later that day, I called my oldest friend so we could catch up on our news. By then I had started to feel guilty about the jumping. I told her about it.

“So now I'm going to bake them cookies,” I explained.

“You tried to wake them, and now you're going to bake them cookies? That is very passive-aggressive of you,” she said, like an old friend does.

I thought about it later, as the butter softened on the counter. A soul sensitive to all it's doing wrong is probably a soul doing something right, I told myself. An awareness of our shortcomings

can actually help us grow instead of becoming used to reassuring ourselves we are fine just as we are, so very messy.

The ginger crinkles were the repentance for the jumping that had been my revenge. The cookies were a way for me to remind myself that I am to love at all times, even when I don't get a good night's sleep. I don't want to be a grouchy neighbor, the mean lady who lives next door and trots off to church on Sunday. I want to be a baker and a maker and a giver.

I sifted and stirred my way through it and talked to my husband. "Do you think this is passive-aggressive?" I asked Brent, while eating spoonfuls of raw dough.

We concluded that if I had baked and delivered the cookies first and then come home to jump up and down and make noise while hurting my feet, that would be passive-aggressive—also weird and not at all holy. Here, the order mattered. Jumping first, followed eventually by shame and regret, then baking. That's holy-*ish*.

This sounds so silly and small, but this is what our days are made of most of the time. The small, the silly, and the splendid. We have all these little opportunities to do something holy and all those big opportunities to do nothing at all. I said sorry, via ginger crinkles left outside their door, for something they didn't even know I had done—as weary as they must have been from staying up all night looking after their house elephant.



Holiness has a public relations problem, even within the church. Being holy is deeply associated in our culture with being a pain in the butt rather than a balm to the soul. Attach the word *holy* to a person, and even in our very best moments we are more likely to imagine them being insufferable or so different from us.

We have also been taught to accept our whole selves just as we are, which is an important message indeed. We need so much to know that we are loved by God and others just as we are. But we can get stuck there. I can wrap myself up in the feeling that it is okay to be just as I am forever, like a cocoon comforter, swaddled and safe.

But we were never supposed to stay just as we are. We get to change. In that new place, we are loved still, just exactly as we are. The ever-loving God and the ever-changing us.

Theologian J. I. Packer explains holiness as being about the moment and the lifetime. The moment is one of repentance—when “one turns away to God from what is wrong”¹—and Packer names the lifetime of living into holiness as “consecration,” which is a lovely, antique silver tea set of a word that he says means giving oneself to God for what is right.

Consecration is the ship that slides into the ocean after repentance and then sails away on gentle waters and through storms at sea. It is the journey into holiness.

That first moment of forgiveness that follows repentance could be the whole, beautiful gift in itself, and that would be enough for most of us. Some of us set up our tents and settle right there.

Except there is always more. The invitation into holiness is an invitation to a deeper knowledge of God and of ourselves. We were never supposed to stay just as we are. We get to change.

The beauty of our life hidden in Christ begins with our conversion from old to new and from then to now. Now is the holiness part. Because we know ourselves so well, it can be hard to believe that we are holy. We likely feel deeply that we are not holy, even though the Scriptures say we are. We may search for holiness around us in our churches, in our friends, or in ourselves, but sometimes it is hard to see. Our own spiritual growth feels just too slow.



How do we know when we are changing, and if we are living out of our holiness?

I asked Darryl,² my friend who has written two books about spiritual growth, how a person knows when they're growing in holiness. His answer was annoying: that you know you are when you don't feel like you are. We talked about the irony that the closer a person gets to God, the more they become aware of their sins. This can make us feel like we are not growing. Darryl said that we can help each other in this journey. That we need each other to help us see the holiness within us and around us. We can search together.

But here's where I want to let you in on a thread that runs through this book: Holiness is not a straight line. It can look more like a scribble on a piece of paper. Our journey to live more fully out of God's holiness and our identity as holy people curves and bends, and we will circle back and go around and take three steps forward and two steps inward and sometimes one big step back. We will jump up and down, and we will make cookies, and we will feel proud of ourselves for doing something that feels good to make up for something that feels bad, and then we might worry about feeling proud. Rather than tracking our spiritual growth as a linear process on a graph with a horizontal and a vertical axis, we learn and lurch as we move closer to Jesus, who is loving us through this messy butterfly journey.



Like the butterfly, our holiness starts in the dark.

J. C. Ryle has been dead for a very long time. In pictures,

the famous author is balding and bearded, with the kind of long, full facial hair my husband, Brent, said he would grow when he retired and when we had grandchildren who would pull it. I said, “Hmmm . . .”

Ryle was an author and minister who came from an accomplished and wealthy family. He became a Christian at Oxford and was later ordained as the first Anglican bishop of Liverpool. When he wrote to his family from school, he described his conversion experience like this: “All these things seemed to flash upon me like a sunbeam, in the winter of 1837.”³ Ryle’s life was changed in the flash of a sunbeam, and then slowly afterward for years to come, until he died in 1900. He wrote *Holiness: Its Nature, Hindrances, Difficulties, and Roots* in 1877, forty years after the sunbeam. I finally read it 144 years later.

This thick book is a manual for holiness. It is hopeful and encouraging, and it serves things straight up, as one might expect from a bishop of that time: “The man [or woman] whose soul is growing feels his own sinfulness and unworthiness more every year. He is ready to say with Job, ‘I am vile’ and with Abraham, I am ‘dust and ashes.’”⁴ And on Ryle goes, making us squirm.

Because generally, if someone tells us they are vile, we worry and try to cheer them up. “Come on, sweetie, you’re not that vile,” we might say. Ryle says that holiness, though, begins with these stark and extremely unflattering insights into oneself.

We’re not used to that anymore. We want to feel better about ourselves, not worse.



Some Anglican churches are high and feel one pope short of being Catholic, while some are so low, you wouldn’t realize you were

in a stand-up, sit-down, turn-around-to-pass-the-peace kind of gathering. A lot of Anglican churches are medium rare, combining ancient rites and sacred words with modern music and passionate preaching. And when a new priest rides into town, that priest is wise to not change everything, or even anything at all for a while, but instead observe and know and be known before they start rearranging the furniture. Whatever their tradition, a wise pastor will simply join in for a while.

When we came to the church we are in now, we moved from low to medium, and Brent joined in. Which meant we were praying weekly a very weird prayer that made me uncomfortable.

One day I confessed this to Brent.

“Well, it makes everyone uncomfortable,” he said, including all the priests like him who kneel when they recite the Prayer of Humble Access in the middle of the weekly Communion service.

The first time he dropped to his knees with the rest of the priests during this prayer, the top of his head remained just visible behind the Communion table upon which stood the highly polished silver goblets full of rich red wine and the small bowls of tiny white wafers. I had never seen my husband, who was raised in a more casual and, may I say, loosey-goosey style of worship, be so full-bodied about the liturgy. It felt holy, and also a little embarrassing for its bodily boldness. His sudden move surprised me. I worried that his bad knee would give out, and I imagined myself jogging down front to haul him back up onto his feet. Such are the weekly worries of people married to pastors. And then we all prayed these words together:

We do not presume to come to this your table, O merciful Lord, trusting in our own righteousness, but in your abundant and great mercies. We are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under your table; but you are the same Lord whose character is always to

*have mercy. Grant us, therefore, gracious Lord, so to eat the flesh of your dear Son Jesus Christ, and to drink his blood, that our sinful bodies may be made clean by his body, and our souls washed through his most precious blood, and that we may evermore dwell in him, and he in us. Amen.*⁵

It's so blunt, and a little bit horrible, while still beautiful, which is a lot of what church can be, whether it's liturgical in this particular way or not. You can see why some churches do away with this painful poetry, and you can also see why some people sink to their knees to pray it.

The gospel is light and we have shadows, and this prayer brings the brightest day and the darkest night together. We are not worthy, but Jesus has us covered. We are made clean—washed like the laundry that hangs on the line and sways and dries in the breeze—because of Jesus. So we confess our brokenness, always, but we can also pause to appreciate how clean, fresh, and new we now get to be. Growing in holiness is the logical next step.

Holiness is a gift we receive, but also one we give back every day. And not just from sitting around feeling holy—although, yes, it would certainly be easier if that were all it entailed.



Consider Peter, the disciple who let Jesus down in a huge, shattering way, and was then rebuilt and relaunched. His story reminds us that holiness is being repaired and then putting ourselves out there again with real, annoying people and frustrating circumstances. Our lives are to be holy in a useful way, and useful in a holy way. Holy is. Holy does.

Peter writes that we must actively respond to God's promises. What is an active response? In the version of the Bible I am

currently highlighting with different colors, it says that “God has given us everything we need for living a godly life,” which means a holy life.

Leaning in is an active response, Peter might have said. Receive and reflect. Eat and grow. He lists some efforts we are to make, which include things like patient endurance, self-control, brotherly kindness, and love.

Heeding Peter’s list is part of our response to God’s love for us. It’s also good for the world. But the people we encounter will never be the only ones who experience our patient endurance and self-control as a gift: We also benefit from our own efforts. Who doesn’t want to grow in peace, contentment, and all the other wonderful things? It is a bit like a list of Saturday chores, work done by us that usually benefits us in some way. Who doesn’t love a clean bathroom? “Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult,” writes Peter in his longest letter. “On the contrary, repay evil with blessing, because to this you were called so that you may inherit a blessing.”⁶ Holiness leads to blessing, we will almost certainly discover, for others and also for ourselves. But it is almost always hard. I fail at this to-do list all the time.

God loves us anyway. We actively love God back by being light in the world, becoming more generally pleasant, loving our loud neighbors as ourselves, and living holy lives, which means doing everything in Peter’s list and then some. Remember, this is the Peter who was once very weak, the Peter who is now a participant in his own long transformation. Like Peter, we will find our courage. We will grow our endurance and our endurance will grow us. The caterpillar will become the butterfly. If Peter can change so much by Jesus doing what Jesus does and Peter doing what Peter was asked, then we can all change.

The story of faith is almost always a story of change.

Sometimes we might need to push ourselves a little to *do* the thing that is holy. But holiness is not all about doing, and it's not at all about perfectionism. (Perfectionism killed the cat.) Holiness is about being *and* doing, taking love in *and* giving love out.

This is quite tough, as anyone who has tried it can attest. "Holiness requires us to show our love for God by the quality of our love for others, whom we must assume that He loves as He loves us,"⁷ J. I. Packer wrote.

This helps holiness's PR problem: to think about holiness as being about loving other people very well, and not about telling them all they are wrong or where exactly their shortcomings lie.



In the Gospel of John, when Jesus rises from the dead, no one expected it. This leads to confusion, and much running to and fro. Mary, one of Jesus' closest followers, comes to the tomb early on Sunday morning and finds it open, not closed; empty, not full. She runs to get Peter and John, who race back to the tomb. "They were both running," the Bible says, "but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first."⁸ They investigate and then run back home again. Mary stays, though, crying outside the tomb. She sees angels where the body used to be, and they ask her why she is upset. Then Jesus himself is there in his resurrected body. She doesn't recognize him at first and thinks he is a gardener. He says her name, and she realizes who he is. Nothing would be the same again.

In this story there is proof of the great rising—that rolled rock, those linens unwrapped, unrequired, and now lying in a puddle of cloth. There is the mercy of the angels and then of Jesus himself. The way he speaks her name: *Mary*. Jesus is so tender, and this is a balm for when we feel so tiny and tired.

I like that it is a gardener Mary confuses Jesus with: a caregiver to soil and seed, a grower of carrots and crocuses. In her confusion there is poetry because he *is* a gardener of sorts, standing full and heavy in his warm body before her. But he is also just out of reach. “Don’t cling to me,” he says, which must have been so difficult to hear. This is joy tempered. Here are mysteries upon mysteries, some resolved, others unsolved, with more to come.

This story tells us what we believe, but it’s also a bit of a picture about *how* we might believe and are likely to behave.

There is the resurrection, yes; and then things will be beautiful and still very hard, at once and in turn. There will be darkness and light. We will sing and shout. We will run toward and run away and run in circles. We will weep and we will be comforted. We will be on a tender and first-name basis. We will reply, “Teacher,” like Mary did, when we are steady on our feet. Even the racing between the disciples in this passage, with the careful noting of who arrived first, feels uncomfortably familiar. We keep track of each other and tabs on each other, and sometimes not to be helpful.

The Bible is full of people who were accepted exactly as they were, but then changed because of that love. So are our churches. Just ask some of the little old ladies about all they have seen and endured and embraced in their long, gracious lives. We need other people to help us become holy. It’s not just you and God, or me and Jesus.

Mary, whose detailed witness rounds out and fills up what we know about what happened that day, was as full of sunny afternoons and rainy Mondays as the rest of us. I suspect her days were not all like a Sunday school picnic after her discovery at the tomb.

We will exclaim with belief and relief, like Mary did,¹⁰ that we have seen the Lord. This might be convincing to some guy on a bus, but maybe not to our very own sisters or cousins. We

ourselves will believe but still need to be convinced. We will be buoyed by each other's witness and remind each other through stories and songs; later that afternoon, we will be alone in our own homes, sipping tea and feeling confused again.

We hold within us overflowing cups and dry deserts both. God is always saving us and calling us to holiness. We are always searching.

