



go + do

DARING TO CHANGE THE WORLD
ONE STORY AT A TIME

J A Y M I L B R A N D T

“Jay Milbrandt has his finger on the pulse of his generation, and his generation is leading us all to deeper action. *Go and Do* should be a playbook for anyone looking to answer God’s call to serve a hurting world.”

—Rich Stearns, president of World Vision US and author of *The Hole in Our Gospel*

“Equal parts guts and grit, *Go and Do* reminds us that we all have an important role to play in transforming the world. You might be surprised what you will accomplish when you take your passions out for a lap around the world.”

—Bob Goff, founder of Restore International and author of *Love Does*

“Jay Milbrandt captures the infectious energy rising from a generation that is facing our hurting world with faith and action. Whether it’s on university campuses across America or in churches around the world, the “go and do” admonition captures our hearts and minds. *Go and Do* presents a question to each one of us: how might I serve to change the world, even if for only one person? This inspiring book is a call to action for every Christian.”

—Judge Kenneth W. Starr, president of Baylor University

“*Go and Do* is a transformative read that will move people from knowledge to action consistent with the teachings of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. As one who has traveled extensively and lived in many countries in the world, witnessing poverty, injustice, and suffering firsthand, I found that Jay Milbrandt’s book *Go and Do* is both a highly recommended read and a call to action. I anticipate that the message of this book will lead to actions with eternal consequences. It is timely, especially considering the global crisis surrounding us!”

—Kadita “A. T.” Tshibaka, president and CEO emeritus of Opportunity International US

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For Ami, Amey, Faifah, Four, Jupee, and Suwanan.

*May I one day be able to return to you even
a fraction of what you've given me.*

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Author's Note

Sometimes It Is about You

WE WERE RAISED TO BELIEVE that each of us is special. From day one, we're told that we're all unique, that we all have a purpose. We are promised that there's a college or job that is perfect for us. We can each follow our own course in life. We can live whatever we dream. Yet we often find ourselves at a crossroads where nothing seems to make sense anymore. That special, unique purpose doesn't appear to exist, like we got on the wrong train and we can't get back. You find yourself asking, *What am I doing here?*

What makes it worse is that we get mixed messages. If all these things we've been led to believe are true, how do we embrace a parallel message that life is not supposed to be about us? How can it be anything but about me when I'm still trying to figure myself out? And how do I respond when I'm told that I'm supposed to die to myself? I don't even understand what that means. I'm still struggling to live life for myself.

Sometimes it *is* about you. Sometimes you need to figure things out for yourself. If you've had that moment or period in life when you've asked, "What am I doing here?" then I've got a challenge for you. A challenge that might just change your life like it did mine.

Actually, it's more than a challenge; it's a dare. I dare you to make a personal revolution. I dare you to go out into the world, to witness the raw edges of life, and then to do something about what you see. I dare you to "go and do."

This book is my personal revolution. But it can be anyone's revolution. Because my crisis was exactly the same crisis that countless others are facing. I see it every day as I work with students who, like me, are asking, "What am I doing here?"

This personal revolution is not about changing the world; it's about changing yourself. This revolution will overthrow your inner constitution, but it will also rescue you. I needed to be rescued—and I was. But only because I was willing to step up to the dare I made to myself.

Those of us who have taken this challenge are exploring the deepest reaches of life and faith in order to find what makes us come alive. We are embarking on a journey that leads to discovering joy. If you want to join us, then keep reading. But I'll warn you, you'll imagine yourself in the pages and stories here. And if you do, if this is you, then you can't back down.

If you accept the dare, then you won't have it easy. To "go" requires taking a giant leap of faith—maybe the biggest, riskiest leap you've ever taken. And to "do" requires forgetting much of what you've been told. People will object—people close to you—and you may even try to talk yourself down from the ledge.

But if you stick with it, this challenge will change you and the way you look at the world.

Sometimes it *is* about you, and this book is about changing yourself. Welcome to the journey.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Jay McInerney". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a large initial "J".

Prologue

WHAT AM I DOING HERE? I blink a few times and swipe away the mosquito netting as I roll off my mat and onto the reed floor.

Mae La Refugee Camp has just sprung to life here along the Thai-Burma border. The camp is bustling with activity. The roosters are crowing and the sun still has to rise over the mountains. I look at my watch. It's only 5 a.m., yet I feel like I'm the last one out of bed.

I stumble out of a makeshift bedroom enclosed by bedsheet walls and into another bamboo-hut-style room overlooking the camp. My hosts—residents of the camp—have already prepared hot water for me. I make a cup of coffee with a 3-in-1 instant mix. I rarely drink coffee, but this is perhaps one of the best cups I've ever tasted. Its rich aroma adds to the moment.

With the fog now rolling out of the valley, the day is beginning to warm up. It rained most of last night, so everything is still soaked—the sun hasn't come out enough to dry the area. It's peaceful. Quite possibly one of the most beautiful mornings I've ever witnessed.

Mae La Refugee Camp is essentially a self-contained village. It's nearly identical to a village in the jungle, except that it's

brimming with tens of thousands of people who cannot leave. This “temporary” camp has been here for more than twenty years.

Last night I sat down with some of the youth to listen to stories of how they arrived here—how they became refugees. A boy in his early teens scurried up to me and began to relate his story as if I were the first person to ever express interest.

First came the mortar shells; violent, thundering explosions piercing the night and raining down on his sleepy village. The Burma Army was attacking. Everyone tried to run before the foot soldiers arrived, he said. Lines of soldiers marched into the village with the authorization to shoot on sight. He last saw his parents that night in the jungle—they all had to run, and in the commotion, they lost each other. Their homes were burned, friends killed, lives destroyed.

This young boy described how he had walked for seven days through a dense, dangerous jungle—mostly at night to avoid being killed or captured. Arriving at the border, he found his way to this camp, where he began a new life. Although the attack took place a few years ago, he vowed he would find his parents again. Until then, this small refugee camp would remain his home.

Before we finished our conversation, more of the youth gathered around to sing a song in their native Karen language (pronounced CAR-in). “Our Karen people are very tired and we don’t see the hope,” the song leader said. “But we hope that someday we will have our lives in our Karen State, and we will get freedom.” Sitting cross-legged on the thatched reed floor before them, I wished I could do something to offer them freedom.

Yet, there’s nothing I can do except show up and listen—just be with them. I’ve got no solutions to their plight. After the

song, they ask a lot of questions about life outside the camp, especially world news. I can answer those. The only thing they ask from me is that I share their story with the outside world—they want to be remembered.

Is this really a refugee camp? I wonder. It's so beautiful and life seems so simple. Unfortunately, the people here can't leave this small island of a village surrounded by barbed wire and armed guards. They do not have the freedom they desperately seek. While the camp provides refuge from persecution in Burma, it's as much or more a prison than life outside the walls would be.

For me, ironically, the camp is an escape. I realize that I feel free. Here, I forget many of the things that occupy my mind in America. Life is less noisy and thoughts so much clearer. It's peculiar how one person's prison can be another person's freedom.

As I watch the sun rise, I try to think back to what brought me to Mae La Refugee Camp in the first place.

I had been trapped in my own prison of sorts—caged in by life's expectations and desires. I had wandered through my own desert until I finally gave in and responded to the cry of my heart for the world's deepest needs.

So, how did I get here?

A dare.

A Dare in the Desert

WHAT AM I DOING HERE? My face buried deep in my hands, I was exasperated.

My head dropped into the textbook in front of me. As my nose lodged in the binding between two thick sets of pages, the aroma of ink formed the walls of my paper and knowledge penitentiary. My mind wandered everywhere except to the matters right in front of me.

What am I doing here? I whispered to myself in exasperation. The library felt eerily quiet this evening.

Why did I come to law school? I wondered. Everything had fit together so well—I was accepted at the school of my choice. I found what I studied to be interesting, and it seemed like I was right where I was supposed to be. But now, in the thick of it, I just wanted to be anywhere but here.

What was this all for? Would I graduate to work for a big law firm so that I could feel exactly the way I'm feeling now—for the rest of my life? Would I end up unhappy? It didn't seem worth it, no matter how much I might be paid or how big my house might be. Life felt too short, and today would be another day I'd never get back.

Maybe, I pondered, I'm doing what I'm supposed to be doing, but I just can't see it yet. It's hard to have perspective when you're in the thickest part of a dense fog. Still, it would certainly be easier and more fun to do something else. I started daydreaming about moving to Aruba to teach windsurfing lessons. I pictured the sun and warm water. I'd drive a Jeep around with the top down. I'd sit most of the day under a thatch-roofed hut, wearing board shorts and dark sunglasses.

I violently shook my head, bringing me back to reality. I detested my lack of focus. I stood up. I had to move around and stretch my stiffened body. A break might help me regain concentration. Walking to the window, I put my hands on the sill and leaned on it. The metal under my palms felt cold, giving a shot of life to my seemingly lifeless body. Gazing outside, I realized how everything looks so much more appealing when you feel trapped.

I didn't realize it yet, but I had wandered into a desert.

The first week of law school, I had attended church on Sunday morning. The theme of the sermon that day posited that throughout life, we find ourselves led in and out of deserts—periods of temptation and hardship. Although difficult, these deserts should be embraced, expected, and appreciated. I didn't like what I heard. The message felt uncomfortable—it felt like divine foreshadowing. A few weeks later, there I sat, in the desert.

Wandering into a desert is a little like getting lost in a car—you make a few turns that you think are correct and

then all of a sudden you realize that you're lost and unable to backtrack. This realization almost always arrives in a single, rushing moment.

My moment of realization didn't hit until near the end of my first semester. All seemed well and good up until this point—life couldn't get any better, in fact. I was in law school—a pinnacle of education on the road to success. In conversations with my peers, we debated profound questions of justice, such as whether the right to a fox belonged to the hunter who began the pursuit or the hunter who captured it. We could debate this for hours. When I wasn't studying, I went surfing at Malibu's world-class point breaks. This good feeling followed me into the classroom. I went into midterm exams as I did any other exam I had taken as an undergrad—I knew how to write my way out of trouble when I didn't know the answers. I actually hoped for difficult questions because I could make my unrehearsed answers sound deep and I'd score well.

A couple of weeks later when I received the score back for my first exam, however, I was shocked. I didn't just barely fail it, I had bombed it. Worse, most of my midterms came back with similar results. Reality hit me upside the head—this would not be the breeze I had anticipated. Time seemed to freeze. My good life ground to a halt.

And then I received my fourth midterm grade. Bad news once again. Like a zombie, I walked back to my apartment. The door shut behind me and I fell apart. It wasn't the grade (thankfully, midterm exams are an exercise in preparation—only the final exam counts); it was that my entire view of myself now seemed to be hanging in the balance.

I thought I was a good student—was I?

I had thrown all my cards on the table—was I going to lose everything?

Everyone I knew was aware of what I was doing—could I tell them I didn't make it?

I had never failed at anything—would this be the first?

These are the kinds of questions that form who we think we are. When the core of who we believe we are is shaken, everything crumbles into sand.

I was in a dry, desolate place. Wandering in the desert, indeed.

I remembered that church sermon from a few months earlier when the preacher said, "We're led in and out of deserts throughout our lives." He explained that deserts come in different shapes and sizes: There are deserts in relationships—you're with someone you don't want to be with and you can't get out, or someone leaves you and you wonder why. There are deserts in careers—you realize that you went all in in one direction and you're not sure it was the right choice, or you find yourself in a career that you despise but you can't figure out what to do next. There are also internal deserts—you realize that you are not who you want to be, but you can't discern what you need to change. No matter the desert, we often wander until something makes us feel alive again.

I reflected back on the journey that brought me into this particular dry land. I had attended Bethel University in St. Paul, Minnesota, for my undergraduate education. Along with degrees in philosophy and business, I had had a great experience. Over the final two years, I had served as a resident adviser to two floors of freshman men, aced all my courses, and during the summers even found some success at competitive windsurfing. I felt that I was coming alive.

With everything going well and smoothly, I was not even the least bit intimidated or frightened about law school. It would be a breeze, I thought. I had a whole list of goals to check off, and

I was ready to take them on. Law school would be another easy one to complete. However, there's truth in Scripture's admonition that pride precedes a fall. Pride lets you miss a few turns in the car and I drove right into a desert.

How quickly we can become a prisoner of our expectations. With undergrad success behind me and facing a raft of low-scoring law-school midterms, I chained myself to the notion that I had to stick it out or be forever branded a failure. But what if I did make it through law school? At the end, would I be handcuffed to a life I would ultimately despise? For the first time in my life, the idea of simply disappearing seemed appealing.

I looked back to the stacks and stacks of books in the library behind me. Many students spent countless focused hours laboring over every single word in the thousands of books here. How could they focus so well? It's funny how a place built on academic freedom could feel so much like a prison.

I knew I needed to get back to work. But more than anything, I needed to be rescued.

A Moment to Remember

I skipped class.

I usually tried not to skip at all, but on this particular day, I found myself intrigued by a conference our law school was hosting. The conference featured lawyers who were going into the world's most dangerous places to help those in the greatest need. Something about it captured my imagination.

I slipped in the door and sat in the back row of the auditorium, as far from the front as possible, next to one of my classmates. I felt like a fish out of water. The people at the conference served the poor, volunteered their time, and went on mission trips. I hadn't done any of that.

The program started and a woman spoke about lawyers rescuing children from brothels, freeing slaves from brick factories, and releasing captives from illegal detention. I felt as though I was suddenly alone in the room. My heart beat fast. I felt as if I was watching myself in a movie—watching to see how I would react. The world seemed to be waiting for me to respond.

When the presentation ended, I sat there in silence. I turned to the person next to me.

“Wow,” I said.

“Wow,” she repeated back.

“I want to do this,” I whispered.

“Me, too,” she agreed.

I went home that night, pulled out my list of life goals, and scribbled, “Go and do something.” I had a new box to check.

I struggled to fall asleep that night. I was too excited. I pictured myself doing the things that I had heard about. I imagined myself breaking down brothel doors and discovering prisons where kids were held illegally. What I had heard that day was heroic. I imagined myself as a hero to someone in the world. It didn’t take superpowers—only the courage to go and do the things that others were afraid to do.

Not only was I drawn to the heroic, I reasoned that it would be good for me. I didn’t know how, but I thought it might make me a better person.

Before I fell asleep, I dared myself to go.

I was ready to check my “go and do” box.

I didn’t know it then, but I still had more wandering to do first.

Law is a great and noble profession, but I wasn’t alive yet. It wasn’t bringing me the kind of joy that woke me up in the morning before the alarm, and I wanted that. I knew many people, including lawyers, who loved what they did, but also

many who did not. I felt that life was too short to take my chances and wind up on the wrong end of that spectrum.

Did that kind of joy actually exist? Maybe I was simply naive to believe that it did. Maybe that kind of joy was like winning the lottery—we hear just enough stories of those who hit the jackpot that we keep buying lottery tickets. Until then, maybe we are destined to wander most of our days. Could the prospects really be that bleak?

I kept thinking about the desert sermon. Maybe there was a reason for this frustration, for these sudden roadblocks. I thought back to that moment of inspiration and clarity I had felt in the auditorium. I imagined myself using my law degree to rescue people, finding them lost in prisons in the loneliest places in the world, or freeing them from slavery. I was heroic in my imagination, alive only when lost in thought.

For the next two years, I continued to think about that moment in the auditorium, but I found myself pulled in various directions by the things I “should” be doing instead. I picked up the pieces of my midterms and got the grades I needed. I found great internships and opportunities that took me on other courses—though never out of the desert. I was so consumed with surviving that my yearning to “go and do” took a back burner. And the box remained unchecked. It gnawed at me. I had yet to take myself up on my own dare.

But here I was, facing my last summer before studying for the bar exam and pursuing a career. It was now or never.

All conventional wisdom told me that to just go and do would be a bad career move and an even worse financial decision. “Summers should be spent getting an internship that becomes a job,” I heard. Or, “How are you going to afford this?” And even “Why don’t you wait until you graduate to try to save the world?”

Maybe they were right, I thought. I should really pursue a more traditional legal career. It was sensible; I made some phone calls. A respected, successful lawyer agreed to meet with me to discuss a job. We arranged an appointment.

Walking into the lawyer's office, I figured this was where I would end up for the summer—it would probably extend into the fall semester or even longer. I looked around the office: mahogany furniture, paneled doors, and a team to answer the phones. I sat down in a chair to get a feel for the place. If I got an opportunity here, how could I turn it down? This lawyer drove an exotic car, lived in a big house, and owned a private jet, no less. I pictured myself following in his footsteps and, one day, having my own private jet.

I was called into the lawyer's office. Escorted through a series of heavy oak doors, I sat down across from him. He told me all the things I could do to help him sell a business he owned—and the millions he might make from the sale. He grumbled that his last business didn't sell for a high enough price and that fuel prices were making it too costly to fly his jet. In spite of his success, he didn't seem joyful. Actually, he seemed really unhappy.

I broke into a cold sweat. My chest tightened and I could hear my heart beating in my head. I worried he could see the drops of sweat forming on my forehead. He asked if I could work on some projects for him—he'd pay me. This would be the beginning.

I stood on the mountaintop. I could see the riches and power below. I thought about my life list and the boxes I wanted to check. Some of the items I had placed on it years earlier were things money could buy, and now I could finally have them. Yet they no longer seemed to excite my imagination, a sharp contrast to the heroic "go and do" box.

I walked out of the office, wiped the sweat from my brow,

and never returned. I knew then that I had no choice but to risk everything. I finally had to accept my dare.

I immediately arranged an internship with an organization combating human trafficking and booked a ticket to Thailand for the summer. There was no turning back now.

Dare accepted.

