

Real Moms' Devotions to Go



**For the
Harried,
Tired, Gult-
ridden, Self
Doubting
Mom In Us
All**

**Lynn Marie-
Ittner
Klammer**

Moms' Devotions to Go Series

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Doubting Mom in Us All

Lynn Marie-Ittner Klammer

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Dedication

Henry David Thoreau once said “Heaven is under our feet as well as over our heads”, and I have come to believe it. I dedicate this book to my husband Mark, who referred to our days of dating as “days of heaven”, and still brings that idealistic beauty to our family each and every day.

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Introduction

I'm amazed by the number of devotional books for mothers that stress, in glowing terms, the joys of motherhood. While I myself have been known to romantically expound upon the virtues of being a mom, I'm usually more in need of inspiration for those times that are not so glowingly joyful. I'm speaking of those times that try my patience, test my resolve, and make me question whether I'm truly up to this monumental task that God has blessed me with. When I've been puked on for the third time in a day; when my lipstick appears smeared upon the newly-painted wall; and when more of the gerbil's food pellets find their way into my son's stomach than the gerbils--those are the times that I need solace and reassurance.

It seems many moms like to write about the depth of their feelings for their children during the cute, touching moments of life, and there's certainly nothing wrong with that. It is after all, that enduring and powerful dynamic that makes all the difficult times worth it. However, this is a book of devotions that offers support, strength and understanding to the harried, tired, guilt-ridden, and self-doubting mom in all of us. This is not a book drowning in rose-tinted explorations of the love between mother and child. This book focuses on the everyday life of a mom--a person for whom naptime is like a breath of fresh air, and stain-removal is an art.

You will find in the following pages observations based upon my life as a mom. At the time of this book's printing, my children are 8, 9, 12 & 14, but the stories are from various times in their lives and reflect a variety of true-to-life experiences that I'm sure all moms can identify with. The stress management activities that accompany each devotion are techniques I've used often in my work as a clinical psychologist.

Whether you're a mom or just someone who enjoys children, I hope you find the enclosed devotions a source of strength and renewal. Motherhood truly is a blessing from God, and God must certainly mean to help us through it, no matter how complex the challenges.

God bless your journey through this book, and motherhood.

Real Moms Know What's Important

“Free me from the trap that is set for me, for you are my refuge.”

Psalm 31:4

I recently attended a graduation party with my family, and as is common in such situations, the conversation quickly turned to general updates on what each of us had been doing with our lives since last together. Eventually, I was asked what new writing projects I was working on. “I’m writing a book of devotions for real moms” I told my two friends beside me.

The look that came across both of their faces was immediate and clearly somewhat confused. “For real moms?” Stacy asked.

“Yes” I replied. “You know, devotions about what real life is like with kids.” Neither Stacy nor Laura looked convinced, but it wasn’t long until what I was trying to explain with words was demonstrated by the actions of my children.

Within minutes, my daughter Sarah scampered up to join us, and Laura pointed out that she had her shoes on the wrong feet. “Oh that’s ok” I said. “I’m just glad that she’s wearing her own shoes, it’s not her fancy church shoes, and that her shoes are all the way on her feet instead her squishing down the backs like she often does.”

Sarah ran off, but it wasn’t long before she was back again, and this time with bits of cake clinging to her cheeks and rosy lips. Again, Laura commented, and I quickly brushed the bits away with my fingertips as I continued talking. Within a few minutes my youngest daughter ran up. She had her shoes on the correct feet Laura pointed out, but the laces were untied. Once again I pointed out that the important thing was that she was wearing shoes at all. And then it occurred to me. That’s what I’d been trying to explain! Life as a “real” mom isn’t like the portraits you see of mom and child where each is spotlessly clean and wearing the contented smile

of achieved perfection. It's more like the graduation party. All six of us were there. The kids were all clean (well, at least when we arrived), dressed and happy...but it was far from what many people would see as "perfect". Don't get me wrong--I envy those moms who can raise happy kids and still present the perfect picture. If you can do both, that's great. However, I believe that being a mom "really" isn't about getting all those superficial things right. It's about raising healthy and happy kids.

Being a mom is messy, frustrating, and just plain crazy sometimes. If my kids are happy, I have sticky cake fingers, and my children are running around with their shoes backwards on their feet, that's ok. I'm happy too.

Psalm 31:4 says "Free me from the trap that is set for me, for you are my refuge." The world sets many "traps" for us. It urges us to match the expectations of a secular, materialistic society, and pushes us to be someone we are not. Commercials on television show us moms granted contentment from using new appliances, and feeling great joy simply by acquiring various products. The world repeatedly tells us that "things" will define us and bring us the happiness we all seek. It tells us that appearances are what count, and keeping up with what others have is critical. The "traps" are numerous, and so persistent, that it seems impossible to not be taken in by them. We must keep our focus on what the Bible teaches us, and pray for God's guidance and strength to avoid the world's traps.

"Real" moms know what's important in life. "Real" moms realize that pressuring themselves to be a perfect parent, with perfectly clean and neat children who act perfectly well behaved all the time, isn't realistic in this imperfect world. Raising children is hard enough without pressuring yourself beyond what's necessary. So take some of the pressure off of yourself, and remind yourself from time to time of what's really important. Be a "real mom" and not just some fantasy-driven image of what one is. Keep the focus on what's real, and you'll reduce some of the stress on yourself, and your family, as well.

Prayer: Lord, help me to keep my focus on what is real in my life as a mom. Amen.

Time to Mother Mom
Feelings are Neither Good nor Bad

As a psychologist, one of the first things I speak to a stressed-out client about is the fact that “feelings are neither good nor bad, they simply are”. Surely God didn’t intend for us to have the wide range of feelings He blessed us with if they were to be detrimental to us. It’s our choices in regards to those feelings that can truly hurt us, not the feelings alone.

For instance, feeling sad or angry when your child has just drawn his latest crayon creation on Aunt Sophie’s heirloom tablecloth may be an uncomfortable set of feelings, but it’s not a “bad” reaction. In fact, it’s healthy. If you start screaming at your child, hitting him or dissolve into hysterical tears (some choices in response to the feelings), then those actions may be destructive but not the feelings. Your first step toward stress reduction is to realize that who you are and what you feel are good things, created by God and blessed with the many gifts He has given you. Your feelings, thoughts, and the stress you’re experiencing are a normal part of who you are and the job you have chosen. It’s your choices in reaction to those challenges that you are endeavoring to improve through the activities on these pages.

Take a moment to reflect upon the range of feelings you are having right now. Do you tend to label your feelings “good” and “bad”? Focus on choices and behaviors as the elements for change, not the feelings themselves.

Then Came Motherhood

“Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding”

Proverbs 3:5

As a Clinical Psychologist I'm accustomed to regularly uttering strange phrases that most people will never find the need to say in an entire lifetime. I thought there was nothing left that I hadn't said or discussed. Then came motherhood.

Since I became a mother, I'm continually astounded by the number of bizarre and sometimes socially awkward things I'm compelled to say in both private and public settings. Yesterday afternoon alone I could be heard to say “take your finger out of your nose” to my three-year-old, “please don't carry caterpillars in your backpack” to my seven-year-old, and asked my two-year-old why she had dumped all of our toothbrushes into the toilet. Never would I have imagined that my life would take such a turn as to make such statements routine.

This life our Lord has given us can take many winding turns. Sometimes these turns are not what we expected, but whatever the outcome we can be assured of our heavenly Father's purpose behind the direction He has pointed us in. I sometimes wonder about that purpose when I'm embarrassed by my five-year-old's ear-deafening belch in the middle of communion, or endlessly frustrated by the constant sprinkling of cracker crumbs under the kitchen counter. I ask myself if I was really the best choice for this parenthood role that He has assigned me. Do I have enough patience? If I were a better mother would my daughter have still thrown our toothbrushes into the toilet? Will I be able to stand the worry, embarrassment and sheer physical workload of being a parent? I don't know the answers to any of those questions, but I do know one thing. I know that I trust our Lord to know what's best for me.

The Bible tells us that we should not lean on our own understanding, but rather trust in God. In my moments of greatest doubt I cling to those words. The role of mother has challenged me like no other in my life. It seems I

am tested physically, psychologically and emotionally on a daily basis. Why would I be given such a task if it was beyond my ability? I have to believe that God's will is working through me in this difficult role.

If you're wondering (as I sometimes do), if you're able to meet the challenges the Lord has presented you with, remind yourself that there is a reason for all things. God's divine hand guides us all to that which is in our best interest. He knows our strengths and weakness, and even in the most unconventional of situations, works His will through us.

Prayer: Lord, please help me remember today that I am an instrument of your will, trusting only you as the guiding force in my life. Amen.

Time to Mother Mom

Breathe Correctly

I'm not ashamed to admit that the tooth brushes in the toilet really pushed me over the edge. When I'm as overwhelmed as I was that day, I often use the simple, quick and effective technique of deep breathing. It has saved me countless stress, and it can help you too.

You can do this any time or place, but if you can find an unencumbered moment, that's best. I used to lock myself in the bathroom to do this when I was on overload. I could still hear the kids on the other side of the door and yet they couldn't distract me by clinging to my legs while I was practicing my breathing.

Simply stop a moment and take a slow, deep breath, counting to ten as you do so. Breathe in through your nose if you can, and push out with your stomach as you inhale. Don't stop inhaling until you have reached the number ten. Once you are at ten, hold your breath a moment or two, and then exhale using the same method. Repeat this two or three times.

If you become light-headed then you're going too fast. Try to keep the count to about one or two per second.

This works because as your body tenses up under stress, you tend to breathe in a shallow manner, blocking your body from the oxygen you need. Deep breathing helps to re-oxygenate (and relax) your body, and makes it easier to think clearly.

A Mom's Denial

“Understanding is a fountain of life to those who have it.” Proverbs 16:22

“Don’t touch it, it hurts!” cried my nine-year-old daughter as she tightly squeezed her hand over her knee. Leahana had fallen while roller-blading down our driveway, and promptly crumpled onto the lawn in her distress.

I won’t touch it” I reassured my hysterical daughter, “but you need to move your hand so I can see it, or I won’t be able to help you feel better.”

Upon hearing my words, Leahana now tightly clamped both hands over her knee and vehemently shook her tear-streaked face. “No, no, it’s all right” she screeched. “Don’t look! It’s ok!”

No matter how I cajoled or coerced her, Leahana would not relinquish her hold on her knee. She was determined that if she believed it strongly enough, the injury would disappear. In fact, she soon began repeating to herself over and over, “it’s ok, it’s ok” as if saying it would make it so.

As I think back on that hot, summer day with my daughter, I remember thinking that she was being far too irrational for a nine-year-old. She was old enough to know that simply pretending something was real, wouldn’t make it so. No matter how completely she hid her injured knee from view, it would still be there—still bleeding, still in need of care. But then something else occurred to me. Even grown-ups act this way. How often do moms deny their own needs in favor of the needs, or even simply “wants”, of their families? Self-sacrifice is certainly a part of being a good mom, but when does self-sacrifice become irrational denial? Proverbs 16:22 says “Understanding is a fountain of life to those who have it.” We as moms need to be open and honest to ourselves about who we are and what we need. Only if we understand, and care for ourselves, will we be healthy and whole enough to in turn care for those we love.

Each of us has basic needs. Even moms. Sometimes those needs are impossible to ignore, like when you get a toothache or are struck by the flu. However, many needs are easy to ignore or simply push aside—but that doesn't make them any less important to your health. Getting a yearly check-up from your physician is an obvious example, but so are things like taking a couple hours (or even a few minutes) for yourself. Getting out with friends from time to time, or even just making an appointment for a hair cut can be a rejuvenating experience. A healthy mom is better able to raise healthy children, and health doesn't just mean physical.

Leahana's example of denying her needs is one I call to mind each time I consider canceling my doctor appointment in order to make it to a school function, or skip eating breakfast so I'll have the time to prepare an unnecessarily fancy one for my kids. God wants His caregivers to be cared for too. Moms just need to be reminded of that more often than do others.

Prayer: Lord, please help me to remember that mothering myself will help me to be a better mother to my children. Amen.

Time to Mother Mom

Wants and Needs

Stress is often caused by disorganization. When your house is a mess, and you can't find anything, you feel stress. In the same way, if your life is chaotic and lacking in focus, you're going to feel stressed-out as well. By clarifying what you truly value and want to accomplish, you will gain the focus needed to simplify, organize...and reduce stress.

I've been a mom for nearly fifteen years now, but it took only a few weeks of motherhood to completely forget my own needs in favor of my children. After only a few days in fact, I was skipping meals, losing sleep in favor of tidying up the house, and living in sweat suits twenty-four hours a day. It was only after writing up a concrete list of my "needs" and "wants" that I could see just how much I had neglected myself, and determine what I really wanted/needed to feel content. This can work for you as well.

Take a few minutes now to sit down and write up a list. Make two columns, one for "wants" and the other for "needs". One page should contain daily needs/wants (such as a daily shower and three meals a day), and a separate page should include only those needs/wants that are more long-term in nature (such as one evening out each month). Only by getting things organized in a concrete, visual manner will you truly be able to take stock of what is necessary to keep your life on track, healthy and happy.

The Hard Questions

"Fix these words of mine in your hearts...Teach them to your children."

Deuteronomy 11:18-20

"Mommy, will I go to Heaven with my Teddy Bear?" six-year-old Sarah softly asked from her bed. In the quiet stillness of the dimly-lit bedroom I felt my heart lurch. It was bedtime and we had just finished saying prayers and completing our nightly little rituals to prepare for sleep. The last thing I wanted to discuss was something as deep and heart-wrenching as death and the afterlife.

"We'll talk about that some other time" I whispered to my little girl as I snuggled her close. "Now it's time to go night-night." As I watched Sarah relax and settle-in under her favorite blankie, I wondered if I'd said the right thing. Sarah had asked similar questions revolving around death over the past weeks, and I'd always managed to put her off. I didn't want to even think about, much less discuss, the prospect of my child dying. But shouldn't I have jumped at this chance to explain what I believed about Jesus, death and Heaven? Shouldn't I have taken this opportunity to share my faith and alleviate any fears Sarah had?

The Bible tells us in Deuteronomy 11:18-20, "Fix these words of mine in your hearts...Teach them to your children." I know that I am to teach my children all that I can, but sometimes I feel inadequate to the task. I'm afraid I'll say the wrong thing or explain in a way that is misunderstood. Am I equal to this monumental responsibility that God has placed in my hands?

As moms it's easy to sometimes forget just how vast and far-reaching our job is. We cook, clean and care for all the physical needs of our children—but we are also caretakers of their souls in many ways. We are called upon to not only "raise" our children in this world, but also to help in the nurturing of their spirits. That takes more than hard work alone—it's takes hard love. Even though I knew it would be disturbing to talk with Sarah about dying, I did it. My heart bled to even think of losing her someday, and my mind rebelled against the need to let reality intrude upon her perfect child-like world, but I answered all her questions.

I hope that the next time you are faced with “hard questions”; you’ll remember my experience and take comfort from knowing that you’re not alone. We all struggle to do our best—especially with those “hard questions”.

Prayer: Dear Lord, please help me to remember that I am never alone in dealing with hard questions. You will always guide me. Amen.

Time to Mother Mom

Relaxing Your Body

Answering all those “hard questions” can take a toll emotionally on a mom, making relaxation all the more important.

When you're stressed emotionally or psychologically, you will be stressed physically as well. No one system operates independently. Each affects the other.

This exercise ideally takes more than a few moments, but if you practice it regularly you will soon find that you're able to achieve a degree of relaxation very quickly, and without completing the entire procedure. If you can do it once a day, and for an extended period of time, that's best. What I'm describing here is an abbreviated version intended to be useful to busy moms who lack the time to commit to something lengthy.

Lie flat on the bed during a time when you won't be disturbed for at least ten minutes (naptime would be ideal, when the kids are in school, etc.). Tightly clench individual muscles, and then relax each in turn. Start with your toes and move up to your calves, thighs, abdomen, hands, shoulders and neck. While you repeatedly tense and relax, try to focus on the difference between the two states as you are feeling it.

As you relax each part of your body, you will likely come to see that you were tense in areas that you were previously unaware were tense...and a feeling of relaxation will soon follow.

The Universal Guilt of Motherhood

"Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life?"

Matthew 6:27

I don't want to go to school today" my nine-year-old daughter cried for what seemed like the hundredth time that morning. Leahana had become increasingly clingy and demanding of one-on-one time with me since summer vacation ended. After checking into every possibility for her behavior (bullies at school, academic problems, etc.), the school counselor and I determined that she was simply at a point in her life where she needed a little extra bonding time with mom.

More time with Mom! Contemplating this recent turn of events, I was mystified. This was the exact type of problem I had foreseen and taken steps to safeguard against when we first decided to have children. I was not a mother who was overscheduled with her own commitments. Both "quality" time and "quantity" were daily priorities in my life. I didn't work full-time or use Day Care or sitters. I was a stay-at-home mom, always available to my children and putting their needs ahead of my own. So why was I feeling such guilt? I somehow hadn't met all of Leahana's needs, and I felt a keen sense of failure, anger and disillusionment.

As I reflected on my feelings I thought how much worse it must be for working moms. I believed I had made all my decisions carefully, I was physically there with my children every day, and yet I had still fallen short somewhere. How much worse it must be for moms who need to work away from home and start off feeling as if they're not able to be there with their kids enough. It seems that no choice can prevent guilt.

There's no magic formula for raising children. No universal strategy to follow that will ensure success. The one thing that is "universal" however, is the guilt that all moms feel. Working moms, stay-at-home moms, homeschoolers, it doesn't matter when it comes to issues of guilt and self-doubt. We all feel it. We all suffer from it. All we can do is our best and hold fast to what the Bible teaches us. "Who of you by worrying can add

a single hour to his life?" The message is clear. Worry, like guilt and self-doubt serve no purpose by themselves. Those feelings won't eliminate the problem, and can even be detrimental to the greater cause.

When I'm beset by irrational guilt, I remember the words of the Bible and place myself in God's hands, pushing the irrational thoughts aside, and you can do the same. Do your best, and set the irrational guilt aside.

Prayer: Lord, give me the courage I require to be the best mom I can be, even when besieged with guilt and self-doubt. Amen.

Time to Mother Mom

Logical Assessment

A significant source of stress is irrational feelings. When we feel guilty or upset in some other way, the result is stress—whether there is good reason for our feelings or not.

Logic is the best defense against guilt and self-doubt. If you know you have done your best to provide for your children, the guilt is likely illogical at its source. You can get a firm hand on what you are feeling by simply writing down that which you are feeling guilty about, then make a concrete list of what you have done right and wrong related to it. You will probably find that your past efforts prove that your guilt is groundless. However, if you find that you have not been doing all you can in regards to that which you feel guilty, it is a perfect opportunity to make changes for the better.

Sample list:

Feeling guilty about not spending enough time with my daughter

What I've done right:

Created a job where I can work at home and therefore be more immediately available.

Allowed an extra fifteen minutes at bedtime to just talk and pray together.

Left the other kids with Grandma while I devoted an entire day to just her.

Tried to be more receptive to when she wants to talk, even when I'm busy.

What I've done wrong:

Made her wait to talk with me until I could sit down quietly with her (it's best to deal with things right away).

Felt guilty when I'm already doing all I can in relation to spending time with her.

Conclusion:

It's clear in looking this over that I've done more to address the problem than I have to create it. In a perfect, magical world, I would of course be free to spend as much time as I wanted to with my daughter, but this isn't a perfect world—so that's illogical. Also, it may not be the best thing to spend too much time with my daughter, so there is that to consider as well.

As you can see, this is a simple and quick exercise that can help you to gain a logical outlook on your negative feelings, and thus reduce your daily stress level.

Straightening Out Priorities

“Set your minds of things above, not on early things.” Colossians 3:2

“Ok, what is this?” I asked my eleven-year-old son as I held up my latest discovery. I had been cleaning out Matthew’s closet (an activity I liken to an archeological dig). I’d worked my way down to the bottom layer of assorted bags, books, clothes (both dirty and clean) and miscellaneous toys, but still had a long way to go.

Faced with Matthew’s characteristic blank stare, I inquired once again, “what is this...or what was it in its former life?” The transparent plastic bag I held in my hand contained something that was now a shade of dark green and partially liquefied. Upon closer inspection (and no credible response from my son) there was a tag that indicated this had been a school Christmas treat from two years prior. My frustration level peaked. How could my son keep his room in this condition? Where had I failed as a parent in instilling in him the value of basic cleanliness? I yelled. I ranted. I raved at my son. This was not to be tolerated in my home! He was never to allow his room to get to this point again!

As I exhausted my emotional storehouse of frustration and anxiety, I paused to take some deep breaths and noticed my son’s tearful eyes. Suddenly my vented hostility took a different direction. What kind of mother was I! How could I yell at my son that way? How could I allow my anger and disappointment over a simple mess to hurt my little boy’s fragile feelings? I had clearly forgotten my priorities.

I turned the closet-cleaning job over to my son, but as I left his room I felt depressed and demoralized. Giving my son a clean room wasn’t so important anymore—not if I had hurt him in the process.

Sometimes, in the course of a hectic day, I get my priorities mixed up. When I lose my way, I call to mind Jesus’ words, “Set your minds of things above, not on earthly things.” Dirty closets and messy rooms aren’t worth getting upset about. They are, after all, just “earthly things”. Keeping that small detail in mind can seem

impossible at time--especially when worried about what other people will think, or our own ingrained view of what being a good mom is.

If you find yourself, as I sometimes do, getting upset over things that really don't matter to you in the long-run, it's time to sit down and think things through. The daily struggle to cook and clean, keep up with the laundry and just generally maintain a reasonable household can cause you to lose sight of the greater purpose. I refuse to believe that God's purpose for our lives involves clean toilets and vacuumed floors. Set your goals far higher, and focus your concerns on your priorities.

Prayer: Lord, please help me to place concerns over "earthly things" where they belong—at the bottom of my priority list. Amen.

Time to Mother Mom

Mission Statement

If you don't know where you want to go in life, then how can you effectively plan a route to get there? It's a simple concept, but one that is often overlooked. Having no clear focus, no direction, and no plan for your life is a common cause of stress.

It seems to me that many people spend a great deal of time running in circles, losing track of what they want in life and how to get it. Successful organizations, unlike individuals, don't do this because they have something guiding them—a mission statement. So why not run your life like a business? Set a list of goals for yourself (both short and long-term), and write out the steps to attain those goals. Seeing in black and white what you want and the steps to get it, will go a long way toward keeping yourself on track and in touch with your true priorities.

The mission statement can be either a personal or family one, but for our purposes here, I will focus on the personal one.

Begin by making a list of what is most important to you. This will probably start out as a broad concept such as “family”, and you should keep your list to four or five items.

Next try to narrow your broad concept down a bit. For example, what is it about family that makes it a priority for you? Is it about feeling loved? Security?

Now, in concrete terms, what are your goals for your family? Is education the focus? Is time spent together the priority? Is having time to talk and share?

Finally, how will you achieve your goals in regards to your family?

Of course, I have simplified this process, but you get the general idea. What you need to do is clearly define what you value most, why you value those things, your concrete goals, and how to attain those goals. Clarifying your thoughts, feelings, and sense of purpose in life will eliminate stress, both short-term and long-term.

Controlling Monsters

“The Lord Himself goes before you...Do not be afraid...”

Deuteronomy 31:8

Since my children were toddlers, I have calmed their irrational bedtime fears by a simple, yet effective technique. Waving my arms magically around me, I would declare with strict authority that all “monsters be gone!” This simple statement at bedtime (along with my assurance that I have power over all monsters) has always been enough to eliminate middle-of-the-night complaints of monsters under the bed, scary shapes in the closet and malevolent shadows. It never failed...until last night.

As my girls and I lay down to sleep for the first time in our new camper, the usual giggles, crude noises, and petty complaints began. My eight-year-old was “too hot”, my five-year-old wanted “more room” because her sister was “touching” her (a grave offense), and my four-year-old wanted to sing instead of sleep.

After the lights were turned out (for the fourth “last time”), the girl’s foolish squabbles turned into fearful questions. How come it was so very dark? What was that strange shadow on the camper wall? Where did that sound come from? Suddenly the inevitable occurred to them. “Do monsters be gone!” they all yelled in unison.

“Monsters be gone!” I called firmly into the night. I could almost feel the relieved “ahs” of the children, as the rare blessing of silence descended upon us. That silence however, was short-lived. Mere seconds later, the tiny, mischievous voice of my youngest was heard to say “monsters...come back!”, at which time the camper erupted into a cacophony of girlish screams.

“It’s ok, it’s ok” I called above the ear-splitting screeching, “Only I have authority over the monsters”. Fortunately, my reassuring statement had the desired effect, and the girls once again settled down to sleep...for a few moments. Out of the dark silence came once again the sweet, silly voice of my four-year-old.

“I have thORITY’ over monsters too!” little Rachel suddenly proclaimed, to which once again exploded the shrill, terror-filled voices of the children.

My evening was one that any parent could identify with, however I found it followed me for days after. I was frustrated by how easily the children believed Rachel’s proclamation of power. As “Mommy”, their trust in me was as strong as any parental bond, yet their fears easily mislead them. If they had thought rationally, they would have never trusted little Rachel over me, but rational choice had little to do with it.

Like little Rachel, how often do we as moms allow fear to mislead us? When Satan’s false promises prey on our anxieties, do we hold firm to the hand we rationally know we should trust, or do we react without thinking? Do we allow fear of making a mistake keep us from doing what we know is best for our children?

The monsters in our world are far scarier than mysterious shadows or imagined threats, but the adult response can be just as irrational as my children’s reaction in the camper. Fear can be a strong, overpowering emotion, but the assurance of God’s love can give us the added strength to combat our fears. His word is our guide, and it is only He who truly has authority over all “monsters”.

Prayer: Lord, please help me to remember that only you can truly protect me. Let me place my trust in you.

Amen.

Time to Mother Mom
Controlling Negative Thoughts

I worry about my children all the time. It's hard not to. The media seems to be constantly reporting on one or another terrible event that has befallen an innocent child. Even a parent who has done all she can to safeguard her children can find herself at any moment plunged into grief and despair. It's simply not a fair world.

When I find myself obsessed with fearful thoughts of all that could happen, I practice a simple technique to force my thoughts to more constructive avenues. My thought-stopping technique is really just a simple prayer in response to my concern:

“Lord Jesus, please don't let that happen to those I love. I place myself, and all I love in your hands Lord. Your will be done.”

This brief by concise prayer, when practiced over time, gives your fears to God, and signals you to immediately turn your thoughts to other matters. It will take some practice, but you may eventually find that it becomes an automatic response to fearful thoughts, and a release from their short-term hold over you. It's a great tool to combat stress.

This prayer works well for me, but you may want to cater one to your specific needs. The idea is to provide a key word (or group of words) that signals your mind to automatically transfer to another thought.

I Can Reach That

“...you are my rock and my fortress...”

Psalm 31:3

I remember it well—the first time I realized that my control over my child was no longer absolute. Seven-year-old Matthew had taken an interest in some of my votive candles, so I calmly did what I had done countless times before. Taking the candles from Matthew’s hands and saying the simple word “no”, I reached above his head and placed them in the most easily adult-accessible, yet fool-proof child-safe location—the top of the refrigerator.

As I glanced at Matthew with a self-satisfied smile upon my face, Matthew rolled his eyes at me and simply said “Mom...I can reach that.”

My illusion of control shattered. I had to finally face the fact that my little boy had truly begun to grow up. Even if his reach had not extended to the height of a refrigerator, he could now easily climb to the top of anything, and could certainly reason his way into getting at whatever he wanted.

As Matthew walked away laughing to himself, I realized that many choices in his life now rested solely in his hands, not mine. I would now have to rely on what I had taught, and modeled for him, to keep him safe.

Matthew had already, with the advent of school two years prior, begun to face a multitude of difficult experiences. Bullies, kids who tempted him to break the rules, and classmates who didn’t believe in God were just some of the challenges

Matthew had met in the world outside our carefully-controlled home environment. He had seen first-hand the disturbing reality that the world-at-large wasn't always right or fair, but I consoled myself with the knowledge that I was involved in his life and an active presence at his school. I still felt a measure of control.

Now, nearly four years later, I realize that the refrigerator was just the beginning. My son no longer faces dangerous things like candles with matches or bullies at school, but rather far more frightening issues like drugs and violence. He encounters all of these, and more, every day when he attends school—and he can “reach” all of them. How do I protect him now? How can I place all of those things out of his reach? The answer of course, is that I can't. When our children are small we worry about their health, and their exposure to dangerous things. We can, by constant diligence, control their environment and protect them. Dangerous things can no longer be removed from Matthew's world. He has now to live with them as we all do. He must now choose to not reach for them.

As we parent our children, let us remember that the early years are our best chance to instill in them the basic values and morals that will serve them well in later years. It is only by laying a firm foundation that we can help them make good choices in later life when they are out of our scope of influence...when they are able to “reach” everything.

Prayer: Lord, please help me to lay a firm foundation for my children, trusting in you to guide my hand. Amen.

Time to Mother Mom Stress Diary

The stress that comes from worrying about your children is only one type. Finding out the “where, when and why” of the stress in your life is a critical step toward managing it. A stress diary can be a great way to set a firm “foundation” for managing your stress, and there’s a simple, easy way to do it.

Using a notepad, label five columns (from left to right) across the top. Your headings will be: day/time, 1-5 stress, cause, action taken, and 1-5 outcome.

For each entry, record the date and time, how stressed you feel on a scale of 1-5, the cause of the stress (what you were doing), what you did in response to feeling stressed, and a 1-5 rating of how effective your method was. Your entries should be brief, and take only a few seconds to complete. Just jot down an entry any time you’re feeling stressed (or right after a particularly stressful moment). The more you write down, the more information you’ll have to learn from. It’s best to keep your diary for a week or two, but even a few days can be enlightening. After you’ve completed your diary, sit down and review your results. You should be able to see a pattern emerge, and begin to pinpoint the chronic causes of stress in your life.

A Moment of Rest

“...those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength”

Isaiah 40:31

I felt like my strength was about to give out. I had come home three hours early to discover my husband encamped in the downstairs bathroom, with only the unmistakable sound of retching audible from the other side of the locked door. Within minutes, I was making those same sounds as I closeted myself in the upstairs bathroom, much to the chagrin of my eldest daughter (who had to resort to using the kitchen sink when the same illness hit her moments later).

When I was finally able to gently lower my exhausted and depleted body into my living room recliner for a much needed respite, I heaved a sigh of relief. Finally a moment of rest. However, it was at that moment that my youngest daughter walked up to me, stated “my tummy doesn’t feel good”, and then promptly vomited at my feet. Well, I did get a “moment” of rest.

As I scrubbed the carpet in between bathing my daughter and reoccurring bouts of my own illness, I heard myself say “I can’t do this. I have to rest”. Moment by moment I felt as if I had nothing left and simply could not go on. Oddly enough however, I found that I did go on. I did manage to wash my little girl and murmur words of comfort. I did get the carpet clean even though I had to leave several times to be sick again myself. I did continue to do my job--which was simply to be “a mom”.

Being a mom is the most tiring job I’ve ever done—and it never stops. There are no “sick days”, no evenings off, and there will certainly be no retirement from it. Once a mom, always a mom. When I feel worn out, stressed, and overwhelmed by sheer exhaustion I remember the words of Isaiah 40:30-31, “Even youths grow tired and weary...but those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength”. He’s not just with me in church when I’m dressed in my Sunday best. God is in every stroke of the washcloth as I clean my daughter, every

weary sigh as I struggle to hold my head up a moment longer to check on my sleeping child. The circumstances may not always be pretty, but I can still lean on Him.

When you feel, as I sometimes do, like you just can't go on, remember that you don't have to...at least not alone. He's there to help you get through those tough and tiring times, and He will, when the time is right, help you to get a moment of rest.

Prayer: Lord, please help me to call your presence to mind when I'm most in need. Amen.

Perfect Forgetfulness

“...the Lord searches every heart and understands every motive behind the thoughts...”

1 Chronicles 28:9

Living with children teaches one to learn to expect the unexpected. I've been raising kids for fifteen years now, and I'm still continually amazed by the bizarre, unexplainable events that seem to occur on a daily basis. Just yesterday I was once again reminded that life with children may be tedious at times, but it is never, ever boring.

My nine-year-old daughter Sarah was holding up a can she had just opened when she asked, “How do I rinse off these garbanzo beans”?

“You just rinse them in the strainer” I answered absentmindedly as I continued to prepare the evening meal. I didn't give the situation a second thought. After all, what could be more straight-forward? Sarah had used the strainer countless times before, so how could there possibly be a problem? As I turned my back on Sarah to prepare some chicken for grilling however, I heard a strange, splashing sound. With an ominous sense of foreboding, I forced myself to slowly turn toward the source of the sound, and was once again assailed by one of the inescapable inevitabilities of living with children—a mess. There, standing in the kitchen with strainer in hand was Sarah pouring her beans into a strainer. Unfortunately the strainer was not being held over the sink, but rather over the floor, upon which a pool of bean water was now rapidly forming.

“What are you doing?!” I exclaimed.

Sarah looked up in horror, and with tears forming in her eyes, answered simply, “I forgot”.

With mounting frustration and incredulity I managed to bark, “How could you forget something like that?!”

I was exasperated by Sarah's mistake, but when the mess was cleaned up and I had time to reflect, I had to admit how often I'd "forgotten" things that also seemed patently obvious. How could someone forget to renew her driver's license, something so critically important to the job of "mom" in a household...but "I forgot" once. Sometimes the mistakes are simpler, but no less obvious, like when "I forgot" to add detergent when I washed a load of clothes or ran the vacuum without a bag (blowing dirt out the back as I sucked it up in the front). Unfortunately, foolish forgetfulness does not restrict itself to nine-year-olds.

Forgetting obvious things can be just as embarrassing and upsetting for moms as it was for Sarah. As moms we put a lot of pressure on ourselves to be perfect, to always have the right answers, and to never forget things. We are, after all, the caretakers of the most precious blessings in our lives. It's a great honor, joy, and awesome responsibility that demands we do our best...but our best can never be perfect. God didn't make us perfect, so it seems to me that it must be part of the plan for us to, just like Sarah, forget things once in a while. Sarah didn't strain bean water onto the floor simply because her brain isn't fully developed yet (as her brother told her later). She did it because she's human, just the way God made her, with all the foibles and flaws that go with it.

Whether it's you or your children who are making forgetful mistakes, remember that it's simply part of how God made you to be. You're not supposed to be perfect. 1 Chronicles 28:9 tells us "...the Lord searches every heart and understands every motive behind the thoughts..." He knows that's you're trying your best, and that's what counts.

Prayer: Lord, please guide me to always try my best, and help me to remember that being perfect isn't how you intended me to be. Amen.

Time to Mother Mom

Thought Stopping

People aren't perfect...and they're not supposed to be. Even so, most people have trouble dealing with their shortcomings, leading them to feelings of inadequacy and causing a great deal of stress.

If you find that you give yourself negative messages about who you are or what you do, try this clever thought-stopping technique to break the habit. Negative self-messages are things like "I'm no good", "I'll never be able to get it right" or "I'm a such a failure". When these types of messages are frequent thoughts, use this technique to stop them.

Wear a rubber band around your wrist, and when you have a negative thought, silently say "stop" to yourself, snap the band, take a deep breath, then immediately redirect your thoughts to something that you feel is a good quality of yours.

This seems like a silly exercise, but it is one of the most effective thought-stopping techniques I've ever seen. When you do it long-term, you will be able to stop repetitive negative thoughts and significantly reduce your stress.

There are Many Ways to Serve

"...whoever loses his life for me will find it."

Matthew 16:25

When I was little, I remember my grandmother's awe of our church's pastor. To her, he was something special. In fact, any man with the word "reverend" before his name was to her a "man of God". As I grew I heard more references such as this regarding the pastoral profession. Pastors were "called" to their vocation it was said. It was as if God Himself had looked them straight in the eye, and told them in plain English to serve as a pastor. It was a profound and mystical experience to be sure. However, as I grew older and began to understand the workings of the church it became clear to me that there were more similarities than there were lofty differences between a reverend and the other professions. When we needed a new pastor and "called" some to our small, country church, it was clear that serving God's people wasn't the only consideration. Location, size of the congregation, benefits and salary were all issues of contention as each pastor made his decision, just as they would be with any other job.

As an adult working in a large religious organization I saw much the same attitude toward the clergy I had seen as a child. Surrounded by priests and nuns, I often witnessed how lay people reacted to them. It was as if pastoral people were extensions of God. However these were not people who spent their days going unto the mount to bring God's word down to us. Rather, they were people who had to fill out paperwork, grapple with financial issues, and navigate office politics just like the rest of us. When an elderly woman once told me that what made the nuns and priests special was that they had "given their lives to God", the first thought that came into my mind was "so have I". I would hate to think that simply because I chose a profession other than church work, that God wouldn't consider me "his" quite as much.

The woman went on to explain that priests and nuns had to forsake all other aspects of traditional life—no marriage or children, a vow of poverty, and a life of service and prayer. They were "completely dedicated" she

said. As I looked down at myself where I was standing with her in the hallway, I must admit that I looked as laden with worldly trappings as a person could get. Dressed in a business suit, I had a briefcase suspended from one shoulder, a diaper bag from the other, and held a child safety gate in front of me as my son toddled down the hallway ahead of me. At that moment I must say that although I was a mom who had chosen a secular profession, I still felt quite “dedicated”. Certainly the ache in my back could attest to that!

When my son grew older and began considering a pastoral profession for his vocation, I was thrilled to be sure. However, I heard myself caution him that there are many ways to serve. The Bible tells us that “...whoever loses his life for me will find it.” We can all serve God through whatever job we choose, if we do so with His word and will in mind. As a mom, I certainly feel that I have dedicated my life to God. My days aren't spent in quiet spiritual contemplation, I have a husband and four children, and I haven't taken a vow of poverty, but I do feel an enduring commitment to God.

The job of being a mom is certainly one of the most important in the world, but it certainly doesn't always seem that way. Moms are often isolated and misunderstood. The repetitive drudgery and unending demands on one's time and patience don't feel lofty and inspired. However, it is clearly a life of sacrifice and service. When we serve as moms, with God in our hearts and minds, we aren't just raising children. We're raising Christians. Can there be a more important “calling” than that?

The next time you feel that you aren't doing enough, or that what you're doing isn't important enough in this world, I hope you will think of my words. God “calls” people in a variety of ways, not all of them understood for what they are.

Prayer: Lord, help me to remember that there are many ways to serve you. Thank you for the wonderful opportunity you have given me to serve you in my role as mother. Amen.

Time to Mother Mom

Daily Stress Reduction Tips

Whatever vocation chosen, stress will be a factor, and motherhood is certainly no exception.

Psychological, emotional and physical stress interact, each affecting the other. If you attend to some basic issues to reduce physical stress, you will also reduce your overall stress.

Here are some basic tips:

Get dressed each morning. It puts you in a competent, in-control state-of-mind.

Have an organized plan for the day. This should be versatile to allow for changes, and not over-scheduled (which can set you up for feeling defeated at the end of the day).

Exercise. This works off tension and releases endorphins.

Don't skip meals. Eating regularly keeps blood sugar levels even, and keeps you alert.

Avoid alcohol. This can have a depressing effect.

Avoid caffeine. You will feel energized at first, but crash later in the day.

Avoid excess sugar. This affects blood sugar levels, and also elevates energy only to crash later.

Eat healthy food. This will help you to maintain energy levels. Eat carbohydrates which break down more slowly, and try to eat frequent, small meals rather than large ones.

Stay hydrated. This will increase energy.

Take quick time-outs. Brief breaks can calm and rejuvenate you.

Deep breathing. Aids in relaxation and oxygenation of body.

Stand tall. This can relieve muscle tension.

Delegate. Even small children can help out and lighten your load.

Striking a Balance

“Cast your cares on the Lord and he will sustain you...”

Psalm 55:22

“That isn’t right!” Rachel yelled. “I shared with Cody, and now he should share with me.” My six-year-old, with the advent of kindergarten a few weeks earlier, had just begun to learn one of life’s basic lessons—people don’t always play fair. As I soothed my daughter’s hurt feelings, I tried to strike a balance between supporting what I know to be “right” (that Cody share), and preparing her to deal with reality (not everyone cares if their choices are right). Her confusion was obvious. After all, right was right and wrong was wrong...wasn’t it? Why would anyone choose to do the wrong thing?

As a mom of fourteen years, I am well acquainted with the daily balancing act that the job requires. It’s not ok to hit people, but you may need to hit someone in self-defense. You should never lie, but you should withhold the truth at times (like when my son told his teacher her dress was ugly). Love one another and treat everyone the same...but stay away from that kid who smokes outside at recess. I want my children to do what’s right, but I don’t want them at risk. I want them to focus on our core values, but I want them to get ahead in this competitive, ruthless world as well. It’s a difficult and confusing job.

Our children exist in that unique and special place somewhere between perfection and needing redemption, before the pain of reality molds them into a collection of choices and mistakes. They are the purest expression of who and what we can be, created in the image of God. It’s difficult to look upon them and not see their potential. When I look to my children’s futures, I wonder which of their most positive blessings will be able to survive the harshness of life. I know so much will be lost. Their trusting natures. Their willingness to embrace the world rather than flinch from it. Their eagerness to love and expectation of being loved. I want them to retain all of those precious qualities, and yet equally wish for them quickly lost, to spare my children as much of the pain of disillusionment as possible. It’s a disturbing balance—“don’t grow up” and “grow up quickly”.

When I feel frustrated and saddened by the unfairness of this world, I remind myself of the power of pain. Bad choices, the hurtful words of others and unfortunate accidents can debilitate some, but also energize others. The loss of my grandfather when I was a child taught me to never take the time with loved ones for granted. My son's battle with health issues made him empathetic toward other kids who are "different". The world may be a dreadful place at times, but it's the hardest lessons that often teach us the most, and make us most able to reach out to others. The unfairness of this world, the pain that it causes, and the struggle against it must all be a part of God's plan. How else could it be that so much good can come out of so much that seems bad? It strengthens me to remember that no matter how well or poorly I guide them, my children are not simply at the mercy of fate. God's hand guides them also. His purpose may not always shine through, but I believe it is there—even in my confusing and frustrating balancing act.

Prayer: Lord, thank you for your guiding hand. Amen

Time to Mother Mom

Worry Time

Worrying about your children is just a part of being a mom, and a big source of daily stress. Excessive worry can become an obsessive type of thinking and require therapy, but for most people, it's simply an occasional painful part of life. There are thought-stopping techniques that are useful for putting an end to repetitive negative thoughts during the day (as described elsewhere in this book). However, if you're the type who lies awake at night with frightening thoughts swirling about in your mind, then another type of management tool might be more effective.

A simple, yet effective technique for many people is to set aside time for worry. Choose your top two worries, and allow fifteen to thirty minutes a day to ruminate about them. Analyze each worry, think of options to alleviate it, and even shed a few tears if that helps. You will likely find that after a few days, your nights will no longer be haunted by unwanted thoughts and fears.

Another way to manage daytime worries is to write the disturbing thoughts down as they occur to you. Tell yourself that you don't need to think about them right now because you will deal with it later and simply redirect your thoughts to something pleasant. At some later time, you can peruse the list and brainstorm productive ways in which to address them.

The Gift of Loss

"...make the most of every opportunity"

Colossians 4:5

For some reason it's the light I remember most. It was nighttime outside, and the lights were dimmed in the room—not daylight, not night, but something in between, like we were caught in a transitory space between the two. It was in this unreal, dimly lit room that I lost a future with my grandfather. He was gone, leaving only the memories of a thirteen-year-old girl to sustain my love for him into the rest of my life.

As the years went by, I experienced more losses. When I was fourteen and my dog, (my life-long companion) died, I railed at the unfairness of it. When my friend from high school moved away, I asked why she had to be taken away from me. When my family moved to a different town I felt the loss of the only home I had ever known, and couldn't understand how anything good could come of it.

These, and many other kinds of losses through the years came and went, until I became a parent and now also felt my children's losses as keenly as my own. It was when my husband and I worried about our son's hurt feelings over being excluded from a game by his friends, that I heard myself saying words that I had said many times, but never truly listened to before. I asked my husband (and myself) what kind of person Matthew would be if we sheltered him from all pain. I knew that as much as it hurt me to allow it, it was pain that would help to define Matthew as a person as much as joy. Matthew needed it. He needed to learn to deal with the pain if he was to be molded into who he was meant to be.

It occurred to me in that moment that all those losses in my life were not really losses. Yes, I had suffered the pain of loss, but I had also reaped the gain of my suffering. Each experience had added to who I was inside, how I could relate to others, and the choices I made for my life. The losses in my life propelled me toward the future. They were part of God's plan to lead me to being an effective therapist, an understanding friend, and

loving wife and mother. I understood my child's pain because I remembered my own. I could help the bereaved widow of a friend because I had experienced the loss of a loved one myself. When a patient descended into depression after the death of her pet poodle, I was able to empathize where others couldn't. The losses of my past were integral threads woven into the tapestry of my life. Without them, the fabric would unravel. They were as necessary as the joys, as integral to who I was as the happy times. From each I learned about the pain of humanity. Each brought me closer to understanding my fellow man and gave me the empathy to reach out to others. They were necessary if I was to fulfill God's plan for my life.

When I think of the Bible stories about Jesus, it's clear to me that suffering is valuable in its own unique way. Jesus found joy in life, but He also suffered too. It was His suffering in fact that was the critical point of His being here on Earth with us. His suffering resulted in ultimate good. His suffering was a gift to all of us, just as our suffering is also a gift from Him, and to others.

The next time you struggle with the pain of life your child suffers, try to remember the greater purpose of it. Pain hurts, but through it comes understanding and strength, empathy with our fellow man, and a closeness to God. It's a defining principle of who we are and who we are to become. It makes us human. It makes us better moms.

Prayer: Lord, thank you for the pain of life that gives me the wisdom and strength to help others, and to be a better mom. Amen.

Time to Mother Mom
Volunteer Your Stress Away

I'm sure you've heard it said before that one of the best ways to help yourself is to help someone else. When you're stressed-out, removing the emphasis from yourself and placing your focus on the needs of another can do wonders to reduce your own personal anxiety.

The Bible tells us in John 15:5, "I am the vine; you are the branches..." When we help others, we become extensions of God's will, and as the words of Colossians tell us, we should "make the most of every opportunity", and help others as they need to be helped. Whether it's a domestic violence shelter, soup kitchen, or even just an hour once a month sorting clothes at the local thrift shop, being a volunteer can give your spirit a lift like nothing else can!

Some ideas for volunteering:

Check with your local school for opportunities. There may be a way to combine "helping" with being there for your child at school.

Domestic violence shelters commonly provide free training and offer a lot of opportunity for direct contact with those in urgent need. They're great places to both give and grow.

Soup kitchens are a great way to volunteer for just a short time without training.

Your local church will no doubt have many opportunities to serve. Occasional office work, custodial, evangelism, visits to shut-ins, or even being a Sunday School teacher are all possible avenues for service.

Many communities have Health Departments and Voluntary Action Centers that can match your skills and time with the needs of the community.

Hospitals often accept help in their gift shops, or with distributing items to patients. Many will be open to you developing your own program—such as rocking premies in the nursery or a reading program.

Whatever you decide, the choices are endless. There is certainly something that will match your time and talents. It just takes a little looking around to find it, and once you've found it, you'll be surprised how you'll wind up feeling that you have received far more than you have given.

A Mother's Irrational Love

"...learn from me...and you will find rest for your souls."

Matthew 11:29

One of the worst days of my life started out as one of the best. It was a warm, sunny day and I had just finished preparing to take my firstborn home from the hospital. As I waited for my husband's arrival, I stretched my sore muscles and breathed a sigh of relief that the most physically harrowing experience of my life was over, and I could finally go home with that which made it all worthwhile--my son.

Looking down into Matthew's face, I felt strangely detached. I loved him I knew, but my exhausted body and frazzled mind left me too overwhelmed to grasp the full significance of who he was to me. I hoped that would come with time. It was in that moment I saw something that turned my blood cold. One side of Matthew's body had started to twitch, and as a trained psychologist, I knew that what I was witnessing was a seizure. As the nurse grabbed Matthew up and raced off to find the doctor, I was left bewildered and frightened. What was happening to my perfect little baby? In my work at a nearby hospital I saw patients with seizures everyday, and I knew that the causes could foretell massive long-term problems. What if my child suffered massive damage? What if Matthew died? My mind whirled with the possibilities.

I sat in the big, wooden rocker in my birthing room and I prayed. I prayed for my son's health. I prayed for my own strength to meet my child's needs. But most of all I prayed that if Matthew was meant to die, that God would take me in his place. I begged and I pleaded with God, certain in the knowledge that I would happily die if Matthew could live. There was not the smallest doubt in my mind. So intent was I on my desperate plea of self-sacrifice in fact, that I never noted the absurdity of it until long after the initial crisis had passed.

The Bible tells us that if we learn from Him we will find rest for our souls. I believe the truth of that statement, but I often find it difficult to adhere to it. I find I want to lean unto my own understanding, rather than his. I

often find myself measuring the Bible's words against my own limited understanding. God's gift of a natural love between mother and child was obvious, but it didn't make sense to my mind, so I didn't want to accept it.

During many tests, a lengthened hospital stay, and close observation I discovered that bond that I had doubted early on. It had always been there, but I had simply been too blind to see it. Reflecting upon my feelings, I marveled at the irrational deal I had tried to make with God. My love for this tiny creature made no sense at all. How could I love someone I hardly even knew? What love could I feel for squalling, needy, tiny creature only days old? There was no rational basis for me to feel a love so deep for Matthew that I would trade my life for his. It simply made no sense.

Now, many years later, it all makes perfect sense. God's gift of the mother/child bond doesn't require thought. It's a remarkable gift because it's free of logic and debate. In a life where every move is a choice and each choice a cause for contention, a parent's love is a blessed relief. Free of logic, free of doubt, and free of choice, a mother's love is a gift unlike any other. Irrational? Perhaps. But no rational choice ever made more sense.

Prayer: Lord, help me to accept your word without measuring it against my own logic. Help to trust only in you. Amen.

Time to Mother Mom

Irrational Thinking

At the root of many problems in life, and much of the stress, is the prevalence of irrational thinking in the lives of people.

When you believe that things in this world are done to you (“that frightens me”, “she really upsets me”), rather than the fact that you experience emotions as a result of how you interpret events, you set yourself up for stress. You need to remember that the control is yours. Your interpretation of events is what determines how you feel.

Imagine for a moment that your mother pitches in to help with the planning of your son’s graduation party. You can interpret that behavior as her desire to assist you out of her love and respect for you. You can also interpret her behavior as that of an intrusive busybody, who is only helping because she feels you are inept.

Your interpretation of events can be so quick that you’re not aware of it, and it’s easy to come to believe that the world is “making you” feel the way you do, rather than your interpretations of it being the cause. When you learn to slow down and analyze your thoughts, you will soon be able to control your feelings and resulting stress.

An example of how to conquer irrational thinking:

Write down the facts of the event that happened. “My mother bought party decorations for my son’s party.”

What did you think when you saw your mother do this? “My first thought was that she believes I’m incapable of picking out proper decorations.”

What feelings (focus only on a couple) did you feel in response to the previous thought? “I felt hurt and angry.”

Is my assessment of my mother's actions accurate? How do I know? "I don't know for sure if my assessment is correct."

Substitute positive thoughts in the place of the negative. "Help with the party will save me time."

The idea is to take the time to determine why you're feeling the way you do. Are your feelings of hurt and anger coming out of your own insecurities regarding your mother's feelings about you? Does she really feel you're incompetent, or is she just trying to be helpful? Slow down and think about your feelings, and you'll be able to control a great deal of your daily stress.

Five Little Words

"Each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give..."

2 Corinthians 9:7

When my mother-in-law asked me to attend a "tea" that her church was having, I wasn't thrilled at the prospect. Being the workaholic that I am, all I could think of were the things I had to do that day, and wouldn't get done while I was at the purely recreational event. However, not wanting to turn down the best mother-in-law in the world, I grudgingly acquiesced.

Soon after arriving at the event, I found myself sitting across from a woman I had never met before. As each woman at the table took turns introducing herself and saying a few words about her life, I smiled and absent-mindedly listened to each describe her church affiliation, kids, grandkids, and all the usual stuff we use to lightly define ourselves. Shirley, the woman across from me, said much the same things as all the others, however it was among her final words that my attention snapped sharply to what she was saying. She said they had lost a daughter, but then she paused, looked down briefly and added "well I shouldn't say we 'lost' her... because we know where she is." I was held spellbound by those words for several seconds, and must admit that while I was supposed to be listening to the inspirational speaker of the following hour, I was instead turning those words over and over again in my mind. I don't know if anyone else at the table had taken notice, but I felt she had not only shared herself that day, but also reached out to all of us. Her expression as she said the words was one of sadness and certainty, and I felt it keenly. It was a very simple statement, yet such a powerful testament to her faith, as well as an assurance to others.

I have often described the two miscarriages my husband and I suffered as having "lost" children, and have many times shared my experience with those suffering similar loss. In trying to help others I wish I had termed my experience in the same way Shirley had. Through Christ, we don't ever truly "lose" the people we love. I know that, but I certainly haven't shown it—not like Shirley has. In those five short words, "we know where she is",

Shirley had risen above all the common social jargon we usually spout, to reach out and touch the hearts and minds of those around her. It was such a simple, fleeting moment, but her faith certainly touched me in a long-lasting and meaningful way.

We never know where our words will lead us, who they will touch, or in what way. Sometimes the simplest of phrases can have a powerful impact on someone, far more substantial than an entire, carefully-crafted speech. Shirley's words were like that for me. The inspirational speaker at the tea was wonderful, but nothing in her talk came as close to touching my heart as Shirley's five little words that day. They will be with me always, as I hope they will now be for you as well.

Prayer: Lord, help to inspire others with the benefit of my experiences. Amen.

Time to Mother Mom

Remember the Positive

Difficult experiences in your life can lead to powerful ways in which to inspire others. Dealing with those painful experiences however, can be very stressful.

To manage the stress of painful memories or loss, try training yourself to remember the positive. When suffering a loss, it's common for people to get stuck in the negative. The pain can be so strong that it blocks out all else. Allow yourself a little time to dwell on your loss and re-direct the negative to the positive.

Allow fifteen to thirty minutes to re-live the loss (actually set a timer). During this time let the memories come naturally. Rant and rave, whimper and cry—whatever you feel like.

Now lie back, close your eyes and breathe deeply. Re-direct your thoughts to positive memories related to the situation. Perhaps loving remembrances of a deceased grandmother, or happy times spent with an estranged friend.

The idea is to allow yourself to feel the pain of the loss, achieve mastery of your grief by relaxing your body after your expression of loss, and then re-direct your focus onto the positive (rather than allowing yourself to get stuck in the negative).

Loss is inevitable, and life goes on regardless of it. Don't let the pain erase all the positive that preceded it.

What's Important?

"...a man's life does not consist in the number of his possessions."

Luke 12:15

My kids love ice cream and never seem to get enough. That's why one hot, summer day I had the brilliant idea of holding our own ice cream social outside. My four kids and I often spread a blanket outside and play games like tell-a-story or share-a-special-moment. They love the special treat and I feel like a good mom for nurturing their creativity with the games we play. The ice cream was all my kids talked about the entire day as they waited for the time of the social to arrive, but I never realized how important I was to the equation.

When the time finally came for the ice cream social to begin, a friend arrived at my home. What a break, I thought! The kids would be happy as larks while they ate their ice cream, and I would have some peace and quiet while my friend and I visited. I couldn't have been more wrong.

After quickly dishing out heaping bowls of ice cream for all four children and shooing them outside, I sat down to visit. However, one by one, each child peeked around the corner until five-year-old Sarah finally marched boldly up to me and demanded to know, "when are you coming outside?"

"Do you see what's important?" my friend said to me. I laughed, and joined my kids after my friend left, but her words still stayed with me. My ice cream-crazed kids weren't happy with just a special treat. In fact, they didn't seem all that interested in the second helping of chocolate fudge ice cream I offered them. They just wanted me to sit down and listen to their stories. It occurred to me that all the special treats in the world were no substitute for my time.

The Bible tells that our lives don't consist in the number of our possessions. As moms we want to give our children many things, especially if there are things that we didn't have as children ourselves. That's only natural. What's important is that we keep our focus on what's important.

It's easy to get caught up in all the special "things" we want to give to our kids. We love them so much that it's tempting to spoil them with treats, and sometimes we use those treats as ways to give ourselves some extra time. But as precious as our time is to us, it's even more precious to our children—and there's no more special treat that we can give our children than ourselves.

Prayer: Lord, please help me to give more of myself to my children. Amen.

Time to Mother Mom

Meaningful Games

Playing games with your children can be a wonderful way to connect with them on a variety of levels. It can also be a great stress reducer, both short-term and long-term.

Short-term, the proper game can open the doors of trust and communication between family members. It can bring issues out into the open in a non-threatening way.

Long-term, the right game can give you valuable insight into the minds and hearts of your children, and help you avoid big problems in the future.

The key is to combine a fun game with a meaningful one.

Quick and Easy “Blanket” Games

Tell-a-Story

Have your kids choose a special spot to spread a blanket (you can do this game anywhere, but the blanket makes it seem more special and out-of-the-ordinary). Tell a short, impromptu story (be as silly as you like). Now have each child tell their own story.

There should be no limits (with the exception of profanity, etc.), but you should guide them to keep the story short so the other kids don't get bored.

You can also do a variation of this game by starting a story, and then having each child in turn add a little more to it.

“Tell-a-Story” is a simple yet creative exercise that will stretch your child's imagination. You may even learn some things you didn't know about the inner workings of your child's mind.

Share-a-Special-Moment

This is another easy activity that's short and simple, but a great bonding experience.

Taking turns, have each child share one of their favorite moments. It can be something that happened to them, something from school, or perhaps just something a friend told them about. The key here is to keep the limits loose and the constraints on acceptance tight. In other words, any "special moment" is fine, but no one should be allowed to be critical or make fun of any one else's "moment". This is a bonding activity, so you should also share a moment. Remember to resist the temptation to analyze. Each moment is just as it is. This is not the time for a discussion of the merits of each "moment".

"Share-a-Special Moment" is a non-threatening way to encourage your child to be open and honest with you. It has the added benefit of exercising a child's ability to prioritize and consider what's really important to him/her.

Does it Snow in Heaven?

“May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight...”

Psalm 19:14

Almost from the time they were born, my children and I have made a point of visiting the cemetery at least a couple times a year. It's a time to honor their great-grandparents graves, as well as an opportunity to learn from the solemn yet intriguing time spent there.

On one such visit shortly after Christmas, as we walked among the various headstones and memorials, we came across a somewhat disturbing sight. It was apparently time for the maintenance staff to clean up, and they had gathered all the grave blankets, flowers, and other Christmas decorations into several large piles. “How can they just throw these things out?” my kids asked in dismay. “Don't they know these are special?”

As we discussed the realities of life—even as related to remembering lost loved ones, we came across something that indeed did seem far too special to simply throw out. There, amidst the chaos and clutter of disposed memorials lay an open letter encased in clear plastic. Water had leaked around the edges, but much of it was still readable. “Read it, read it” my kids urged as I drew it from the pile of debris.

The letter was for “mom and dad” and written in a young child's hand. It said “I wonder if it snows in Heaven”, and continued on to express the child's sadness that her parents weren't with her at Christmas. It was one of the most heart-wrenching things I had ever read. With serious eyes and soft voices, my children debated how the letter's author could have lost both her parents. They wanted to know what happened. They cared, and I was proud to see the compassion evident on their small faces.

“How could they throw that out?” my daughter asked with tears in her eyes. Now her mommy and daddy will never get it.”

“Oh I think she already received this letter long ago” I answered as I blinked away my own tears.

“But how can that be?” my daughter puzzled. I was silent a moment, as my kids looked up at me with expectant faces. How could I sooth their sensitive hearts while at the same time educate them theologically?

As I felt the increasing pressure to make a reasonable answer, I remembered the words of a Catholic nun from years before. She counseled women who were enduring terrible life crises, and when she was asked how she knew what to say, her answer was one that I never forgot. She said that before she goes in to speak with a woman, she prays to God to give her the right words to say, and then the words always come to her.

Remembering Sister Anne’s words, I settled on the first thing that came into my mind. “Do you think God really needs this piece of paper for Him to know what’s in this child’s heart? Don’t you think He, and the mom and dad, probably knew it already before it was even written down?”

There was silence among my children after that (a rare thing indeed), so I knew that they were trying to process what I had told them. It was difficult for them to grasp, and yet I think spiritually, understanding it was as natural as breathing. They questioned, they struggled with their limited human ability to understand, but they accepted.

Isn’t life as a Christian like my kids that day? I know I often find myself upset by worldly concerns. I wonder why unpleasant things happen to my children sometimes, and I worry about their futures. I question the job of “mother” that God has given me, and strive to understand it at times. However on some undefined level, it all makes sense. I trust God to know what’s best and to help me make the right choices. I worry and struggle, but in the end I accept.

As with my visit to the cemetery, the job of “mom” asks a lot of us. We can be expected to explain things that are very sad and complex. However, if you’re ever stuck, put your faith in God, and count on Him to help you find the answers.

Prayer: Lord, help me to remember that I can always turn to you for help in difficult times. Amen.

Time to Mother Mom

Planning Ahead

It's always a useful endeavor to appeal to God for guidance when you don't know what to do or say. His direction can neutralize any stressful moment. However, another way to minimize stress is to plan ahead for it. There are things you can do that keep problems from arising. A few preventative measures can help you minimize the need for seeking help in the first place.

Don't procrastinate. In fact, do as many things ahead of time as possible.

Avoid negative people, or those who tend to "push your buttons".

Don't leave loose ends. Whenever possible, finish projects the same day you begin them.

Plan for the next day the night before. This will help avoid early-morning chaos.

Never rely on your memory. Keeping a daily planner will give you a sense of security and eliminate the anxiety that comes from wondering if you've forgotten something.

Allow extra time for appointments/commitments, and have contingency plans in case something goes wrong.

Lower your expectations for non-essentials (housework, lawn work, etc.). Keep your focus on what's really important.

Prioritize. Don't worry about things that don't really matter. Remember the difference between needs and wants.

Schedule the things you don't like for as early in the day as possible.

Simplify!

The Real Thing

"The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever."

1 John 2:17

"Where is it, where is it" little Sarah screeched as she searched frantically through the clothes stacked on the table.

"What are you looking for" I asked.

"Aunt Laura's kiss" Sarah whined as tears filled her eyes. "I laid it right here on the table before I went outside, and now it's gone."

As I scrambled to decipher Sarah's words, it slowly dawned on me that "Aunt Laura's kiss" was likely the lipstick-blotted tissue that I had thrown out earlier following Laura's visit to our home. That Sarah had meant to keep it hadn't even occurred to me during my hurried clean-up.

"I only see Aunt Laura once a year" Sarah cried, her whine rapidly becoming a wail, "and now I lost her kiss!" Fat tears rolled down Sarah's cheeks as she tipped her head back and bellowed her anguish to the Heavens.

As I bundled Sarah to me, I consoled her with a gentle back rub, and explained to her that the lipstick tissue wasn't really all that important--what was important was the love that Aunt Laura's kiss conveyed. Of course, to a seven-year-old this explanation (as profound as I thought it was) did nothing to solve the problem--Sarah still wanted her tissue. However, the situation gave me pause for thought. I wondered...how often do "things" seem to take the place of what's really important in our lives.

I remember a few years ago when some relatives were fighting over their deceased grandmother's antique ring. The animosity created because of this "thing" turned sister against sister and certainly couldn't have been what their grandmother would have wanted. The fighting was not a loving tribute to Grandma's memory, nor her enduring love. It seemed that what was most important in what Grandma left behind was not her love, but rather a shiny piece of metal.

Aunt Laura's lipstick smeared tissue was like that ring. Sarah had shifted her focus from the soft, snuggly moment of Aunt Laura's kiss, and all the love it entailed, to an attachment to the tissue Laura had wiped her lips on first. The tissue was only a "thing", meaningless except for being a reminder of a lovely memory--yet Sarah clung to it as if it were the embodiment of Aunt Laura's love itself.

Aunt Laura mailed Sarah another tissue with her lip prints on it...but the issue wasn't so easily resolved for me. I had to re-evaluate some of my own past. My Grandma's mixing bowls often sit on the shelf unused because they remind me of her--yet I'm sure she wouldn't have wanted that. My children adore the fake fur rug my Grandfather bought me just prior to his death, yet I keep it packed away to preserve it--when I know full well his memory would be better served if I let them play with it as I had as a child.

As a mom I want to model my values to my children, not just state them. I tell them time and again that "things" aren't what's important...and yet I still remind Sarah of the time she broke the living room lamp. When my youngest daughter recently cut her finger, I was more immediately focused on washing the blood stain out of her new pants than snuggling her. After all, the cut was superficial and had already stopped bleeding, but the stain was rapidly setting...the hug could wait but the stain wouldn't, right? No matter how hard I try not to, I sometimes set my values aside.

My memories, the love I feel from friends and family (both living and deceased), are what I hold close to my heart. "Things" are a cold substitute for the real love behind them. Unfortunately, it can be hard to stick to our values in a materialistic world that seems to stress the superficial, but as moms it's critical that we try. I try to keep my focus on what's real, and model that for my children. I know I'm going to fail at times, but I keep

trying—and that's a good lesson for my children as well. As long as we keep trying, maybe they will throughout their lives too.

Prayer: Lord, help me to keep my focus on what is "real" in life, for both me and my children. Amen.

Time to Mother Mom
"Counting Your Blessings"

When I think about the materialism of this world, I can't help but relate it to covetousness. The Bible tells us that "a heart at peace gives life to the body, but envy rots the bones" (Proverbs 14:30). It can be no mistake that coveting what others have was certainly seen by God as a significant issue. In fact, an entire commandment is devoted to it.

Envy is often the root of personal dissatisfaction and stress. In fact, you may be experiencing it without even realizing it. Comparisons to what others have may not seem like envy, but they can impact your view of your own life. If you see your situation, relative to those around you, as somehow less than it should be, you will feel stressed. Conversely you will feel good about yourself if others aren't doing as well. This "relative" psychology is simply a part of human nature, and it's why "counting your blessings" is so effective.

This is a simple exercise designed to focus your thoughts, in a concrete manner, upon that which is positive in your life. Unlike the usual listing of "good" things however, you must also list what you deem to be "bad". This will help you to achieve a degree of balance. Hopefully you will see a preponderance of positive items. If the negative list is longer however, then it's time to take steps toward change. That sense of order and control will aid in your stress reduction and management.

Good

Bad

Ever Changing Motherhood

“Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.”

Mark 13:31

“Are you comfortable now?” I asked my little “baby”. Rachel was six-years-old, but still the baby of the family. I had been snuggling Rachel so close to me that she could hardly move.

“If you’d let go of me, then I could find out” came Rachel’s simple reply. She didn’t try to pull away from me, but as soon as I let her go, she shifted and turned this way and that until repositioning herself to a more comfortable fit.

As I watched my “baby” find her own place in the bed, I wondered how many other times my need to hold her close had held her back from finding her own place in the world. When my twelve-year-old son complained that Rachel received special treatment just because she was the youngest in the family, I found myself automatically answering “it’s not just Rachel who is my ‘baby’. All of you are.” As my youngest however, Rachel had come to represent my last chance to be “mommy”. Sure, I’d always be a mom, but never again would I be a mommy to small child. All those sweet baby moments of cuddling and cartoons, baby talk and silly questions about the mysterious world seemed to be slipping through my fingers at an alarming rate. I couldn’t help but grip onto Rachel as tightly as I could as my last chance to enjoy all that was babyhood. I just wasn’t ready to let go of that time in my life. It wasn’t just about Rachel; it was about my changing role as a mom.

When Rachel started school that same year, it signaled the end of an era, early empty-nest syndrome, or whatever you want to call it. Rachel starting school was a sign-post of life’s journey, telling me that I had

passed out of a time that would never come again. Never again would I have babies in diapers or little feet thump, thumping down the hall at 6am to wake me.

No more drooly chins or even mid-day Play-doh sessions. It was a difficult change to accept.

A friend once said of her daughter starting school that “she belongs to the world now”, and that’s how I feel. I can’t keep them all to myself anymore. A part of them will always be gone now. I can always have their love, but who they are, and their place in the world, will no longer be attached to only me. It’s time for them each to be their own person now, with their own friends, experiences and choices. My children will always be a part of me, but now instead of me being their whole world, I will only be a part of theirs.

You often hear people refer to motherhood as requiring a major life adjustment. However, I think it would be far more accurate to say that it’s a series of complex adjustments. Our lives change dramatically when a child arrives in our lives. The demands of 24-hour supervision and constant needs can be overwhelming and often force us to put our own needs aside. With each stage of a child’s development, the mom’s world changes as well, requiring more adjustments. This continues throughout the various stages until we hopefully finally realize the ultimate goal of seeing our child self-sufficient—seeing our role dramatically change yet again. How do we do it? As a psychologist I know that there’s lots written about making these adjustments, but believe me, no matter how enlightened or educated you are, it’s still a struggle. When I feel overwhelmed by the constant changes I’m expected to endure, I draw strength from the words of the Bible, “Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.” Those words are like a calming balm to me as I’m reminded that no matter how my life changes, God’s love will never change. He will always be there for me, just the same, yesterday, today and tomorrow.

Prayer: Lord, thank you for your enduring, unchanging presence in my life. Amen.

Time to Mother Mom
Give Your Worries to God

The adjustment of motherhood can cause a lot of stress. A simple yet effective way to relieve some of your stress is by writing down your worries on a piece of paper. The act of writing can help you to organize your thoughts and focus in on the source of your stress. If you don't like to spend a lot of time writing, then just make a simple list of the things that concern you.

Next, pray about your worries. One by one, address your concerns to God. Take some time to explain why you feel the way you do, and ask for His guidance not only in dealing with your problems, but also in relieving your stress. End by placing your cares in His hands, to be dealt with by His will alone.

Now, tear the paper up into tiny pieces. Be as expressive as you want. Rip, tear, wad into a ball, or even throw the paper across the room. Visualize your worries being "thrown away" now that you have given them to God. This simple exercise provides you the opportunity to not only organize your worries, but also focus on your faith in God's guidance in your life. Finally, the physical act of tearing up the paper can be a physiological stress relief.

The Value of Connections

“Two are better than one...pity the man who falls and has no one to help him up!”

Ecclesiastes 4:9-10

Wednesday morning at our local restaurant play area with six small children (four of my own) seemed like a good idea at the start. A weekday morning should ensure that we'd have the place to ourselves, and order should be easily maintained.

The first few moments proved my initial premise correct as the children happily munched on their breakfasts. However, the situation rapidly altered as one by one finished the food in record time and took off to play.

As I watched in horrified fascination, the children screamed and chased through the tubes, bounced enough to jar the equipment from its foundation, and raised a din that threatened to crescendo to previously unheard of proportions. I felt I should probably do something to contain this chaotic milieu, but reassured myself that as long as no one was leaking body fluids, all was well. After all, how often did I allow my kids to simply run wild—hardly ever.

Adults periodically came and went, clearly overwhelmed by the sheer noise level of the room. Some stayed, smiled politely at me, and took seats an appropriate distance from where I was seated, but it was those with children who caught my attention. Their children did not keep the appropriate distance. No social structures regarding strangers seemed to apply to them when they noticed my group of kids. In fact, the very sight of my children seemed to instantly energize them so that they could barely sit and wolf down their meals before tearing off to join the milieu. Within minutes, the children went from strangers, to seeming like life-long companions.

As I looked over at one of the other moms, I could see she was rather haggard-looking. Her clothes didn't match, and her hair was simply pulled back with a scrunchy. There was a stain of some sort on her blouse that I suspected came from the infant now cradled in her arms, while her other two toddlers chased my screaming children through the colorful, plastic tubes. We made eye-contact, and she smiled but then quickly looked down at her coffee. Another mom sat in the corner, leaning against the window as she casually watched her daughter navigate a rope ladder. A third mom sat quietly across the room, and made frequent eye-contact, even said hello once, but sat quietly tapping her fingers on the table before her while her two little boys played.

As I sat there absorbing the scene around me, I had to wonder. When had we lost that child-like ability to connect with others? As our children happily played, we mothers sat apart, shutting ourselves off from possible support and friendship. Of the three of us, I was the only one who had brought something to do (as I scribbled this story onto my notebook of paper). What a shame that we couldn't join together, as our children had, and share our thoughts and trials. I'm sure each would have so much to offer the other.

It's hard sometimes for moms to link with each other, to ask for their needs, to accept help. Do you ever feel that you need to be the supermom, completely in control and needing no one else? As moms we all need to reach out sometimes...and even when we feel like we don't. As the Bible says, two are better than one. From the very beginning, God made Eve for Adam, showing us that human beings need the company of others, and motherhood is no exception. In fact, motherhood can be an isolating type of lifestyle, allowing little time or opportunity for linking with other adults.

The next time I'm in a situation like the one of this story, I think I'll gather up my courage and introduce myself to the other moms. I know we won't run off to play in the tubes like the kids, but maybe I'll see a similar spark of excitement in their eyes as we connect as moms, and share a little of our lives.

Prayer: Lord, please help me to connect with other moms. Give me the courage and opportunity to do so.

Amen.

Time to Mother Mom

Join with Others

The job of “mom” can be isolating. A great way to deal with everyday levels of stress, while at the same time connecting with other moms, is to find a hobby or organization to join.

There are many organizations, clubs and other types of groups that cater to moms specifically, but even non-mom groups can be great for connecting with other women with similar interests.

Hobbies are also a wonderful way to reach out to others. People sometimes see hobbies as things that take time away from already overloaded lives. However, if you combine your interests with productive endeavors, you can make the situation work for you. For instance, some women make crafts that they then sell at bazaars and craft shows. Likewise, home businesses have often started from a simple hobby. Perhaps you have a skill that lends itself to being sold on the internet or within local stores. Right now I'm raising finches. I love birds, my children get to witness the wonder of new life, and we all share in the business of raising and selling the baby birds when they're ready. I also love to knit, and there's a local group that gets together just to sit and knit.

The possibilities are endless. Take an interest, combine it with your family or others, and see where it takes you.

A Stained Life

“Test everything. Hold on to the good”

1 Thessalonians 5:21

“You stained my life” came the quiet comment from the bed before me. I had just tucked eight-year-old Sarah in for the night, when my little girl’s softly spoken words shocked and confused me.

“What do you mean?” I cautiously asked, and settled down beside her.

“You stained my life” Sarah continued, “when you told that story about me in my class.” I had visited Sarah’s second-grade class some months prior, and had told what I thought was a funny story about when Sarah was only a year or two old. I had just planted a couple flats of flowers one spring, and told tiny Sarah to not touch them. She was so captivated by the big, colorful blooms however, that she couldn’t resist them, and proceeded to pluck all of the flowers off of their stems before I was aware of what was happening. I was left with a garden full of very healthy looking green stems without any petals! I thought the story a cute, endearing one and the class roared in laughter, but apparently Sarah didn’t find the story such an enjoyable one.

“I thought you’d like that story” I defended myself.

“Well I didn’t” replied Sarah. “Now everyone knows that I did that.”

After I tried my best to explain to Sarah why I had told the story, and reassured her that the kids would likely not remember it after a few months, I left her room. However, the phrase didn’t leave my mind. What exactly would a “stained life” really be? It would have to involve something bad enough that the result left a negative consequence that could not be altered.

My thoughts soon turned to past patients. I remembered the mom who had allowed her boyfriend to live with her even after she knew he was molesting her daughter. I thought of the mom who no longer wanted the child she had adopted because the pre-teen had been diagnosed with schizophrenia. Those were moms whose behavior had surely “stained” their children’s lives. Certainly my cute story could not have stained Sarah.

I think one of the biggest concerns that all moms have is the worry that something they do, or not do, might damage their child. I ask myself if I’m spending enough one-to-one time with my children...or do I spend too much? Have they been given too many household chores...or too few? Is my manner of discipline appropriate to their needs, or am I too influenced by my own upbringing? The number of ways in which I question myself is endless...and that’s how I know that I’m on the right track.

The Bible tells us to “test everything”, and hold on to what is good. My past patients hadn’t questioned their choices. They hadn’t worried about mistakes until after they had already taken action. When we as moms worry if what we’re doing is right; when we spend sleepless nights ruminating over our choices for our kids; and when we research, ask questions, and search out answers to our parenting questions, we are in all actuality following part of God’s plan for us. We are not supposed to have all the answers, but rather, we are supposed to always be seeking them.

Will you make mistakes in your parenting? Most certainly. Will your mistakes irrevocably “stain” your child’s life? Probably not. As long as you are always trying your best, seeking answers, and making your choices out of love, your children will likely reap the positive benefits of your parenting. Don’t worry about making mistakes, just keep asking the questions.

Prayer: Lord, please give me the strength to keep asking questions, and do my best as a parent. Amen.

Time to Mother Mom Meditation

Making mistakes is a worry that all moms face. It can create a lot of stress, and a way to deal with that stress is through meditation.

Meditation has been used by many traditions, both religious and non-religious. It's a wonderful way to relieve stress on every level—psychological, emotional and physical. Through its use, you can relax, focus, and feel rejuvenated. However, it's not as easy to master as it seems. You can gain some benefit from it the first time you attempt it, however to fully benefit from it, you will need to practice it regularly.

Note: for our purposes, relaxation is the main focus of this activity. If you fall asleep, you have allowed your mind to wander and failed to achieve the deep relaxation you seek. What you want to achieve is a state of relaxed awareness.

Set aside a period of 15-20 minutes.

Choose a single-syllable word that has a positive meaning for you, such as peace, relax, or calm.

Sit comfortably in a quiet room where you are certain to not be disturbed.

.Close your eyes and focus on your breathing and any other sensations in your body. Do this for 2-5 minutes.

Now begin to softly speak (or think) the word you chose earlier. Repeat it over and over, focusing your mind intently upon it, and shutting out all other thoughts. You'll be surprised how difficult it is to stop your mind from wandering, and equally surprised by how much control you will eventually achieve as you practice

The Ghost Did It

“For He will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways.”

Psalm 91:11

In an attempt to manage a household of six people, I've come to use my basement as a warehouse of sorts. When anything of probable future use is found for a good price, from bike helmets to office supplies, down into the bowels of the basement it goes. This also applies to food—one of the larger expenses of my life with four children. I have an extra freezer and refrigerator in the basement, and shelving units to hold extra items. This system works very well, and saves us considerable money long-term. As the kids have gotten older however, and I've attempted to involve them in the everyday running of the household, the smoothness of the operation has suffered a bit.

Just a couple months ago, while picking up a few things from the basement to transport upstairs, I made a disturbing discovery. There amid the variety of soft drinks was a plastic shopping bag. My kids are responsible for transporting extra grocery items to the basement when I return from shopping, so my first thought was that someone had simply forgotten to unpack one. Looking inside the bag, I was astounded. A milk jug was inside, and it looked as if it was about to explode. I didn't even know that spoiled milk could expand to such an extent inside a plastic jug! Apparently, one of the kids had simply set the milk down and left it there—a very irresponsible act.

When I met privately with the children (I say privately because I try to spare my husband as many of these bizarre stresses as possible), I was met with what has become a common reaction to such a situation with my kids. I asked “who did this?”, and they in turn, one at a time, replied “I didn't do it”.

I have become accustomed to this type of response, so much so in fact that I also have a standard response...”well I guess the ghost did it”. This “household ghost” has now been the scapegoat for a long line of

mishaps and irresponsible behaviors. I have learned that when no one cause can be determined (as with the milk, which had happened so long ago that no one could remember doing it), settling the blame on the “ghost” is the best I can do.

Somehow as the years have past, the “ghost” has been given another type of responsibility. When things go right, and we can't explain why or how, once again I think “the Ghost did it”, only now it's another type of Ghost I think of. When my youngest daughter Rachel fell off the ladder she was perched on as she picked mulberries from our tree (and by the way fell onto my new Azalea bush), she was thankfully unhurt (not to sound ungrateful, but I wish could say the same for my plant). When my oldest daughter stepped on a bee, I was relieved that her reaction wasn't severe (as mine always are). And when middle daughter had surgery and all turned out well, I once again thought about “the ghost”.

Does the Holy Ghost watch over us? The Bible tells us that He will guard us in all our ways, and I can't help but rely on that assurance. I know that God watches over us all, and that knowledge allows me to place some of my worry on Him. When I worry if my children will avoid injury or survive bouts with illness, I find some relief in knowing He is there. When I wonder if my children will ever become responsible individuals (and no longer leave milk to turn into a ticking time bomb in my basement), I lean on Him. His guidance and protection is there for all moms who worry and fret over the development and safety of their children.

The next time my family escapes disaster or something wonderful happens, I'll ask the kids who was responsible for it. I know what they'll say. They'll say “I don't know” or “I didn't do it”. But I know what I'm going to say. I'm going to say “the Ghost did it”.

Prayer: Lord, thank you for your daily guidance. Amen.

Time to Mother Mom

Stress Journaling

Keeping a journal has been a common practice for generations, and is a wonderful way to manage stress.

The great thing about a journal rather than a traditional “diary” (a record of daily life) is that you can write whenever you feel like it, for as long as you like, and about whatever you like.

*When you're feeling stressed, find a period of 10-15 minutes and write down the event that caused the stress. Don't worry about spelling or grammar, just write your thoughts. Next, identify how the event made you feel.

Example:

Event—A neighbor asked me to baby-sit and I said yes even though I didn't have time.

Feelings—frustrated, resentful and angry.

*Now, focusing on each feeling you listed, consider why you had that feeling.

Example:

“frustrated”—because couldn't bring myself to say no when I should have.

*Finally, ask “will this still matter to me in twenty years?” Most things people feel stress about really don't matter long-term. In fact, most things that upset you won't even be remembered long-term...so are they really worth feeling stressed over?

This type of stress journal helps you to focus, define, and analyze the causes of specific stressful incidents, rather than simply recording them. The idea is to gain insight into your reactions to particular situations and

learn to put them into proper perspective, which will in turn help you to minimize stress in future similar situations.

The Misunderstood Profession

"I can do everything through Him who gives me strength" Philippians 4:13

"You're so lucky" an acquaintance once told me when we stopped to chat in the grocery store aisle. "You can just raise your kids."

What she was referring to was that, unlike her, I was a work-at-home mom. To her, my life was consigned to the simple focus of home and hearth, rather than existing in her "real world" of competing for jobs, men, social position and the various other absurd trappings of modern life. She went on to use terms like "goal setting" and "long-term plans" as if those were foreign to me.

My initial reaction to this well-meaning acquaintance was hostility. Yes, I knew I was lucky to be a mom, but not for the reasons she thought. My life was rich and fulfilled not because it was easy and stress-free. In fact, I would have been willing to arm wrestle her for the title of most stressed-out. This was a woman who obviously had never chased after a child who just washed her hair in the toilet. I doubt she had ever scratched molding dough out of carpeting or washed crayon off a freshly-painted wall while cooking dinner and negotiating a writing contract on the phone...all at the same time. And it's not just the everyday juggling act that makes being a "mom" stressful. It's the 24-hour, unrelenting nature of the job. There are no vacations, no sick-days, and certainly no concrete pat-on-the-backs like there are with other professions. I don't get a smile from co-workers, or "good job" comment from a boss. There's no Christmas bonus or office party, and I never, ever receive a paycheck.

The young women seemed to envy me, thinking I was just like her minus the stressful professional demands on her time. She was wrong. Motherhood is not even just a job, it's a lifestyle. Her envy was misplaced and foolish.

Our lives are not like other women. We have to manage many things, all at once, and without any breaks. Our job is undervalued by society, and we are often misunderstood by those who don't have children. Add to that the awesome responsibility that accompanies our position, and we are prime candidates for stress overload. When I'm overwhelmed by the demands of my job, I look to Philippians 4:13 that says, "I can do everything through Him who gives me strength". Reading that verse reminds me that I'm not alone. I'm can do what I'm meant to do because God will be there beside me. He lifts me up when I feel beaten down by the demands of my job. When I feel misunderstood, His love comforts me.

I hope reading about my experience in the grocery store will remind you that you are not alone. God is with you, and so are all the other moms who struggle with similar issues day after day. The misconceptions and bias' of society are there for all of us.

As to that other woman who views motherhood as a stress-free utopia...don't worry. I don't need to set her straight. She told me she plans on having a large family someday.

Prayer: Lord, Thank you for giving me strength to handle the everyday events in life. Thank you also for keeping me company each and everyday. Amen.

Time to Mother Mom

Setting Goals

Human beings are oriented toward growth. We are goal-setters, with a need to improve ourselves and our surroundings. Of course, this can be affected by inter-personal and social issues, but in general, people strive to be more than they are throughout their lifetimes.

This pursuit of “something more” can lead to a great deal of stress, especially when it’s unfocused. When goals are focused and steps to them clear, the stress generated can be a positive, energizing force, rather than negative.

As a mom it’s easy to forget that concrete goals are just as important in your life as in others, and not just for your children. Use the below lines to focus in on what you want for your life over the next year. Write one or two steps to accomplish each goal in the lines to the right of it.

Remember to keep your goals reasonable. It’s better to have less rather than more when it comes to setting these short-term goals. Setting your sights too high will only add to more stress when you can’t achieve them.

Areas you may wish to focus on. Use these categories or choose your own:

Faith life

Self—what do you want in your inner-life (personal quiet time, hobbies, etc.)

Relationships

Profession

Hobbies

Example: What do you want your “faith life” to look like one year from now?

“I want to have read the first six books of the Bible.” Steps: I will keep a Bible next to my bed, and read five minutes each night before going to sleep.

“I want to be involved in church ministry one hour a month.” Steps: I will call the church secretary and investigate volunteer opportunities specifically for things I can do within my time frame.

Universal Truths

“He alone is my rock and my salvation...I will never be shaken.”

Psalm 62:2

Taking four small children (one of them not even mine) into the local drug store was probably not my most brilliant of ideas. I managed to keep the troops together in the parking lot, but the moment we passed through the automatic sliding doors, they broke formation, splitting off into three different directions. As I focused on quickly gathering the couple items I had come for, my concurrent doomed attempt to watch the children proved futile. Leahana had broken off to stare in awed silence at the jewelry, Rachel was running toward the ice cream freezers, and Sarah (with her friend Emily in tow) had managed to find the one unpriced item in the candy aisle that they wanted me to purchase. As I struggled to gather the children together and answer the multitude of simultaneously chattered questions, I realized this was yet another of those inescapable truths of being a mom—there is no such thing as a quick stop at a store. What should have taken only a couple minutes was already stretching into a twenty minute ordeal.

When I finally stood at the checkout counter, foolishly confident that the children would quietly wait for me a short distance off, I was relieved. That relief was short-lived however, as I heard a sudden loud clanging of a multitude of outdoor chimes. The clerk and I looked behind me to see all four children, guiltily standing before a display of outdoor chimes that were just settling back to their previously stable position.

It was another of those universal truths of motherhood—children will embarrass moms.

“I thought that stand was going over” said the clerk with a slow shake of the head. With a look of consternation she added, “Are those your kids?”

I cringed as I glanced back at the four children who were already beginning to wander off to another point of potential mischief. The clerk seemed disapproving. Did I really want to admit they were mine? Looking the clerk straight in the eye I said “no. No, they’re not mine”

There was a moment of silence between the clerk and I...then she burst into laughter.

“Well” I said (as I chuckled along), “at least one of them isn’t mine.” We continued to laugh as we finished our business, I whistled at the children, and they followed me out like obedient soldiers.

Are there times when you feel like not claiming your kids? I know there have been plenty of times I’ve momentarily felt that way. Once my daughter crawled inside a department store clothing rack while I was looking through the dresses. It took only a moment, and the entire rack tipped over, almost hitting a woman on the other side. Another daughter asked why a restaurant employee (in her presence) had a facial deformity. Those were both times when had I been asked “is that your child”, I’d have been tempted to say “no”.

Children can stress moms in so many ways, including socially. There seems to be a never-ending variety of unpredictable things they can do or say to cause us to wish for the floor to open beneath us. When I’m feeling unsure of how to handle a socially awkward situation, or pressured by the demands of social propriety, I recall the strength my faith gives me. Psalm 62:2 says “He alone is my rock and my salvation...I will never be shaken.” I think of the “rock” that my faith is, and I know that no matter what happens, or how embarrassing or exasperating, my faith stands firm to help me through it.

If you sometimes feel overwhelmed by the antics of your children, remember, this is just another universal truth of the blessing of motherhood. All moms experience it, and all moms have to deal with it. As with all the other universal truths, God will help you through it with strength, wisdom and love.

Prayer: Lord, please help me to remember that no matter how difficult or embarrassing motherhood is sometimes; your love will always give me the strength to endure it. Amen.

Time to Mother Mom

Call a Friend

Whether it's stressful social situations, or just the average stress of everyday life, there are ways to manage and control your anxiety.

It may sound simplistic, but one of the best ways to counter stress is to discuss your problems with a friend. When is the last time you called a friend and talked about your day? Set aside a block of time (perhaps twenty to thirty minutes), where you can simply sit and talk.

Think of the pictures you've seen of a psychologist's patient laying on a couch with the therapist sitting behind him taking notes. This classic Freudian image depicts a basic component of therapy. Talking. The patient, in a non-threatening setting, has the opportunity to voice his concerns. Of course, therapy is far more involved than simply having someone to talk to, but it does demonstrate the importance of communication when a person is troubled.

Often as moms, we tend to put our own needs on hold—even when it comes to the simple need of communicating with others. When you talk things through, it often becomes apparent that situations are not quite as dire as they may have seemed. Talking to another person can help you to put your concerns into perspective, and you'll probably hang the phone up with a smile on your face.

What Children Need

"The world and its desires pass away..."

1 John 2:17

Camping with four young children was never my idea of fun. My husband assured me however that a two-week excursion pulling our pop-up camper through several national parks was a necessity if we were to aspire to the status of "good parents". I had my doubts. You see, my husband's idea of a family vacation is to cover as much of the country as humanly possible, stopping only to sleep (or relieve oneself by the side of the road). Camping is in the back country with no amenities and his idea of providing me with running water for a bath is to pull the van up next to a river and hand me the bar of soap he keeps under his seat. I'm not what anyone would call a "high maintenance" woman, but still, this was too rough for me. Knowing this, I did my best to resist going, but in the end, the enthusiasm of the kids combined with parental guilt, melted my resolve.

After three days of "vacation" I was already tired, hungry, mosquito-bitten, and horrified by the determined tick that I had pried off of my neck. I was also irritable and convinced that the rest eleven days would be a true exercise in human endurance in order to give to my children what a "good parent" should. In the end however, what I learned was that what I gave to my children by going was more about me than the trip itself.

After the trip was over and I was cleanly and comfortably once again ensconced within my much-appreciated home, I began to hear snatches of conversations between my children. I was somewhat surprised by what I heard. What the children reminisced about wasn't the majesty of the Badlands or the grandeur of Devil's Tower, but rather the times Dad heated coffee water on the engine of the van. They repeatedly retold how we played cards together at night, and laughed about the two youngest kids bringing their "blankie" and "Teddy" along. The DVD player that Dad had installed on the ceiling of the van paled in comparison to the time Dad cooked them soup on the van's radiator. And Yellowstone's geyser basin couldn't compete with the long talk

we had in the dark camper one night. It became clear that the “things” which meant the most to the children were the things that were already ours to give without the trappings of a lengthy trip.

It's easy to get caught up in anxiety and guilt as we strive to be a “good parent”. I know I often wonder if I'm doing enough in my quest to provide the best I can toward the development of my children. The Bible tells us that “the world and its desires pass away” and I try to remember that when I worry that I'm not providing everything other kids seem to have. We need to remember that God has already provided what our children need most. He has provided us. Elaborate vacations, trendy clothes or the latest electronic games that “all the other kids have” pale in comparison to the priceless value of time with Mom or Dad. Being a “good parent” is about spending time with our children, and all the rest is just frosting on the cake.

Prayer: Lord, please help me to remember that what my children most need is time with me, and that all the material things of the world don't really matter. Amen.

Time to Mother Mom

Saying No

Are you a “people pleaser”? Do you find it difficult to say no when you’re asked for a favor?

It’s natural to find “no” a difficult word to say. We all want to be liked and to help out when we can. However, it’s critical to your mental health that you learn to say no when you need to. If what you’re being asked to do will negatively affect the priorities you have set for your life, then you need to say no. When you don’t have the time for another commitment, no must be the answer. Sometimes, even if you simply don’t like or want to engage in the requested activity, saying no should sometimes be your response.

I hear what you’re saying. You’re saying, “But it’s so hard to say no!” I understand that. It’s stressful to say no, but even more stressful to be stuck with the consequences of not being able to. You may feel angry and resentful of the person making the request. Your acceptance may even reinforce people to make more of the unwanted requests.

Make your decisions based upon what your values and priorities in life are, rather than fears of how others will feel about you. Here are some things to consider when dealing with an individual request upon your time/talents:

What are the possible consequences of saying no? Look at each realistically.

Practice saying “no” with easy situations/people before trying it out with those who intimidate you.

When stuck, ask for time to think about it. Then practice your response before you speak to the person again.

Don’t give in when someone is persistent. That sets up a bad precedent, making them likely to ignore your initial response again next time.

If you still have trouble, here are some standard responses that work well:

I'm not taking on any new commitments right now.

I'm over-extended at the moment, maybe next time.

I don't feel I'm the right person for that job.

I'm not comfortable with that. It's not my kind of thing.

I need to focus on my current responsibilities right now.

I'm not interested, but I'll help you find someone who is. Note: This is a particularly effective one, as most people are just trying to get the job done rather than specifically wanting you to do it.

Growing Strong Trees

“Train us a child in the way he should go; and when he is old, he will not turn from it.”

Proverbs 22:6

Not long ago my father-in-law told me about a tree he grew in a wood lot near his home. It was a lovely tree, growing straight and tall, without the usual ravages of harsh weather to affect its growth. When the larger, adult trees surrounding it were harvested however, the first strong gust of wind snapped the pretty tree in two. My father-in-law compared this to a tree in his front yard. It has a thick, strong trunk that has stood firm against even the strongest of winds on his farm. This tree is not nearly as pretty as the other however. It isn't as straight and tall. In fact, it has a curve near its base where the persistent westerly winds bent it as it grew. It never had the protection the broken tree had been seemingly blessed with.

Hearing this story put me in mind of a common pitfall of parenting. As moms we love our children and want the best for them. We want to protect them from playground bullies, failed expectations, and all the other potential dangers of the world. It's tempting to surround them with our loving arms and shield them from the natural pain that is only a normal part of growing up. When we do this however, we may be like those adult trees on the wood lot. They shielded the younger tree from all harm, and it grew to be beautiful, tall and straight. However, when left alone, it was ill prepared to withstand even the most basic of trials. Like a child too protected, it couldn't cope with life on its own. Conversely, the bent and battered tree in my father-in-law's yard had suffered and struggled, but was able to survive the harshness of life.

The Bible tell us, “Train us a child in the way he should go; and when he is old, he will not turn from it”. Part of that training must be to stand back sometimes and allow our children to experience the pain of life. They need to make mistakes, be disappointed, and face the elements of life that would try to hurt them. They need to fall down, if only to learn how to pick themselves up again.

I think one of the most stressful parts of being a mom is the need to allow my children to suffer. Only by making their own mistakes, and facing the consequences of them, can they grow to be strong and responsible adults. Surely the Lord intends that our children be raised to withstand the pressures of this world rather than hide, or cringe away from them. Raising strong adults, able to confront and fight the evil of this world, must be one of our goals as moms.

I ask God's strength as I endeavor to "train my children in the way they should go". My heart will continue to bleed when I watch the harsh, cruel winds batter and bend my children, but I'll stand firm in the faith that through the trials, God's will shall prevail, growing children who can stand strong in this world long after I am gone.

Prayer: Lord, please help me to step back sometimes and allow my children to feel the pain necessary for them to learn and grow. Amen.

Time to Mother Mom

Read The Book

Training children can be a trying job. When you're feeling stress, try this way to relieve it.

The Bible is filled with verses that can help you manage life, feel stronger and inspire you to deal with life more productively in the future. A concordance of the Bible can be a wonderful tool to help you locate a specific passage to address whatever problem you're facing on a particular day.

You may also simply try reading some favorite verses, or after praying for guidance, open the Bible at random. No matter how you approach it, the Bible has a great deal to offer.

Here are some verses to get you started when times are tough:

2 Samuel 22:7

Psalms 55:22

Isaiah 41:10

John 14:1

Matthew 11:28

1 Peter 2:20

James 1:12

Whatever the problem you're facing, and no matter how great your stress, the Lord is always there to help you through it.

It's Not What You Do, But How You Do It

"What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, and yet lose or forfeit his very self?"

Luke 9:23

As any mom knows, being a parent is more than just raising children to who they will be in the future. It's also about teaching them how to reach back into the past.

As the obsessively-driven mother that I am, I set out one summer to do just that in what I thought was a very concrete and effective way. I pulled out genealogy maps, devoted hours to internet searches, and incessantly questioned relatives about the past. After only a couple months I had managed to construct a reasonably sound family tree dating back into the 1800's and was quite pleased with myself as I sat down with my kids to educate them in their roots. I couldn't say that they weren't interested, because they were. However, the multitude of names lying stoically on the white sheet of paper did nothing to stir their imaginations. I had some interesting stories of past relatives, but they couldn't connect in a personal way. I had decided to shelf that particular project until they were older, when I made a surprising discovery.

Each summer I harvest my current bushes and make jelly. It's not just because I like jelly, but rather a tie to my grandmother who always did the same throughout her life. In fact, it was difficult to even find currant bushes to plant. As one greenhouse worker told me, "no one under forty will have ever heard of them". My kids were with me as I searched for the bushes. They were there as we planted and watered them, then watched and waited for the tiny buds to appear that would foretell our much-anticipated harvest. After a couple years, when we finally had enough berries to make jelly, the kids helped me pick them and listened to my stories of my grandmother as we stripped the tiny red berries from their stems, just as Grandma had taught me all those years ago.

This summer as I was picking my currants alone one hot and humid day, it occurred to me how connected I felt to my grandmother. Even though she's been gone several years, and it's been many more since she made jelly, I was keenly aware of her as I stripped the berries into my stainless steel bowl. As I watched my hands at work, I could see Grandmas. In the quiet solitude of morning, I could hear her voice reflecting upon her own childhood. She had left a piece of herself with me all those years ago that managed to persevere into my own adulthood. When I brought my bounty into the kitchen my children scampered around the bowl exclaiming "we're going to make Grandma's jelly!" They knew the significance of the currants wasn't just jelly. They knew it was Grandma's jelly. She had reached them as well, and there was the connection to the past that I had been seeking.

This job of "mom" is a complex one. We are called on to be so many different things to our children, and it's easy to pressure ourselves to do too much too fast. The summer I had decided to be a genealogical historian hadn't worked out as I planned because I had missed the point entirely. Knowing the names and dates of our past isn't of much value without the personal connection to go with them. My kids "know" their great-grandma because they have touched a part of her. She's real to them now. In the same way, what we do for our kids, what we give them, and what ways we educate them isn't as important as how we do those things. It's not the number of things we do for our kids that will stay with them. The Bible tells us "What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, and yet lose or forfeit his very self?" We can do a great many things in this life, and gain a great deal, but if we lose our focus on how best to do those things (on what really matters), then we really gain nothing at all. In my case, names and places on a genealogy map are not much use without the sense of love and connectedness that can go with them.

So the next time you feel like you're failing to do all you want to with your kids (as I had with my genealogy project), I hope you take comfort from my example. It's not how much you do but how you do it.

Prayer: Lord, help me to slow down and focus on quality in what I do. Amen.

Time to Mother Mom

Control the Clutter

Do you have a lot of things you want to get done, but just never seem to have the time? I have a lot of projects (like my genealogy map) that I've started but don't have the time to finish, so pieces of this and that lay here and there, waiting for me to "get around to it".

Clutter is well known as a cause of stress for people. If you find that general clutter around your home is becoming a source of anxiety, here are some basic tips to help you control it.

The first step is to prioritize. Is there anything, or any particular area of your home, that needs to be dealt with first (a pile of bills mixed in with junk mail, food that's spoiling, etc.).

Next, decide how much time you want to devote to decluttering. Do you have entire days to devote to the project, or just hours? I suggest you set aside a period of thirty to sixty minutes each day. If you have more on a given day, that's fine, but at least devote the minimum time each day.

Now choose an area to start with. I like to tackle a small area each day. A single drawer, a table top, or a single pile of magazines is a great way to set limits.

Begin by picking out the items you need and use often. Those are the things that should remain. Next, sort out items that you only need rarely. Those are things that can be stored elsewhere away from your prime living area (perhaps in the basement, attic or shed).

Now look at what's left. These are things that aren't needed. Those items you can't bear to part with should be displayed somewhere or labeled and packed away. Unwanted items can be thrown out or given to charity. If you can't decide on a particular item, move it to another location where you can re-visit it in a month or so. By

then, you will hopefully be able to decide—but don't allow yourself to keep putting off the decision. That's how things pile up and never get dealt with.

With just a little time each day, you can relieve the stress of clutter.

What Moms Do

“Many are the plans in a man’s heart, but it is the Lord’s purpose that prevails.”

Proverbs 19:21

Before I had kids I was astounded by what I’d see mom’s do. Sitting in a restaurant across from a family of four, I once saw a mom pick up a pacifier her toddler had dropped on the floor, pop it into her own mouth (apparently to “clean” it), and return it to her child. It was definitely a “yuck” moment. “How could she do that,” I wondered. What was it about having kids that seemed to raise one’s threshold for grossness? It would certainly never happen to me.

Well, here I am four kids later, and a basic tenant of motherhood is now crystal clear to me. All concepts of what is necessary or even possible are relative to the moment. For example, I would never in a million years eat raw egg, yet as I was writing this my daughter proudly presented me with her latest creation—a gooey omelet. I don’t usually eat slimy, partially-cooked food, but the joy in her eyes as she watched me eat it far out-weighted the intestinal instability I would likely experience later. I would also never use my hand to wipe someone else’s nose, but I’ve done that a few times now. I’ve even spit-shined faces, cleaned up poo and been puked on countless times. I refuse to accept what other moms have told me in relation to this phenomenon. They say it doesn’t bother you when it’s your own child. I don’t think that’s true for most moms. It’s still gross. I think the real reason for what we do is simply because it has to be done. There’s simply no time, no other person, or no other way to deal with a particular situation, and so we do it--it’s part of the job. That’s what moms do. They do what needs doing regardless of their own needs and wants.

When I became a mom I planned to avoid most of the gross stuff. In fact, I thought that the gross stuff ended once the kids were out of diapers. Boy was I wrong. The job of mom is not one that caters to adult sensibilities. Kids burp in church and sneeze in friend’s faces. They stick dirt up their noses, eat the pet Gerbils’ food, and puke staining red pop onto brand-new outfits. Moms are simply the front-line of defense,

doing whatever is necessary to salvage each situation as it occurs. Does it have to be so yucky? Even when they're older they don't wash their stinky gym clothes, leave overcooked spaghetti cemented to the kitchen counter and grow unapproved science experiments under the bed in their room.

The Bible says "Many are the plans in a man's heart, but it is the Lord's purpose that prevails." Being a mom isn't a glamorous job. It's not even a clean job much of the time. It is however a job that God surely designed the way He did for a reason. I believe motherhood is supposed to be messy. I think we're meant to struggle along with our children, and be tested and tried. It takes courage to go through labor (especially after you've done it once). It takes fortitude to clean up disgusting, foul-smelling messes. It even takes courage to go into public with unpredictable, socially-inept urchins. Keeping up with children even as they pass into early adulthood, is a job that requires strength and perseverance. It has to have all been a part of God's plan.

I had a lot of plans for what motherhood would be like, but in the end, it's God's plan that counts. His view of motherhood doesn't quite match mine, but I'll trust Him and follow his plan. After all, that's what Christian moms do.

Prayer: Lord, please help me to take courage in the knowledge that my life as a mother is a part of your plan.

Amen.

Time to Mother Mom
Exercise Away Your Stress

Motherhood is a messy job, but it's clearly a part of God's plan. We all experience it. When the stress of constant clean ups becomes trying, there are ways to deal with the stress.

Physical exercise is a wonderful way to relieve stress. It strengthens your body and helps with oxygenation. It also can make you feel more energized, less fatigued and healthier. Psychologically, it triggers mood-elevating chemicals in the brain that can help with depression and allows for a release of anxiety and anger. While you're exercising, you are also focusing on something other than your problems, allowing for a break from your concerns.

When choosing an exercise program, remember to include stretching exercises that will relax those areas of your body that hold stress. Everyone has their own unique problem areas when it comes to where they hold their stress physically. For instance, I'm often first aware that I'm under stress when my neck begins to ache. I often experience this before I'm even consciously aware that something is bothering me. Stretching exercises will help to relax those areas of your body that are tight with stress.

Talk with your doctor first about the exercise program that is right for you. However, even if you choose to simply engage in some gentle stretching exercises each day, you will certainly feel some benefit. The idea is to make the exercise a regular activity. It should be simple and enjoyable so that you don't dread doing it each day—which would only add to your stress.

Exercise your stress away!

Be One with Your Machine

"...each of us has one body with many members...so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others."

Romans 12:4

"The van doesn't speak English, but it tells you important things" my husband told me as he pestered me for ignoring the latest insignificant noise the van was making. Many times he had lectured me on the value of being "one with your machine", a lofty condition which (supposedly unlike him) I would never attain. He assured me that if I simply paid attention to what was different about my vehicle, I would be able to discern what was wrong with it.

My husband's lecture annoyed me of course, but his initial comment stayed with me. It seemed a statement far more universal in application than he had intended. It could be applied to so many facets of life. My body doesn't tell me in English when it's sick, but I can tell something's wrong with it if I pay attention to its signals. My children don't always tell me what their needs are, but knowing them as I do, subtle signals of sadness or disappointment are easy to spot.

In many ways my faith is this way as well, but I'm often guilty of ignoring its signals. When my son recently asked me about a passage in Philemon, I didn't know where to look in my Bible. Clearly a signal that I had been neglectful in my Bible studies. When I skipped church in favor of summer fun, my daughter Sarah asked why we didn't go.

When she told me she had wanted to go, the warning bells rang. The signals were there, but I wanted to overlook them.

My husband's annoying lecture about oneness with one's vehicle served a logical purpose after all. It got me thinking about being one with my faith and family. As a mom, I know I'm often not "one" with who I am. I allow myself to ignore the signals of my own needs. I overlook the warning bells that signal something is wrong, in favor of meeting my other responsibilities. I think that by ignoring the signals about me, I'm better able to focus on the signals my family generates. It's a common problem of moms everywhere, but it's an affliction born of misunderstanding. Being the best I can be for my family means being "one" not only with them, but with myself as well. Only by achieving a deeper awareness of who I am can I truly be fully aware of who they are.

The Bible tells us that "...each of us has one body with many members...so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others." An awareness of each of our parts leads to a great understanding of the whole. No one part can be ignored without it affecting all the others. To simplify this, if the van doesn't work, then I'm not going very far. Likewise, if mom doesn't "work", then how can the children get where they need to go in life.

I don't think I'll ever achieve the status of being "one with my machine" when it comes to the family mini-van. I will however, strive to be one with the other "machines" in my life, including myself.

Prayer: Lord, Thank you for making me unique but also making me one with the people in my life... and with You. Amen

Time to Mother Mom
The Power of Forgiveness

We know from the Bible that forgiveness is one of the most important practices there is. However, in the secular world, it is vastly undervalued.

Forgiveness is also often misunderstood, perhaps because of the common phrase “forgive and forget”. Forgiveness is not about forgetting, or allowing yourself to trust the person who has hurt you. It’s also not something you do only for someone else, but rather a gift you give to yourself.

When you don’t forgive, you actually hurt yourself more than you hurt the person who has harmed you. Bottling up all the pain and rage will take its toll on you physically, psychologically, emotionally and spiritually. Forgiving is about putting the situation into perspective, and letting go of all that negative energy.

Think about what happened logically. If it helps, you can write it down.

Try to analyze what happened. Why do you think the person hurt you? What is their perspective and what is yours?

Pray for God’s guidance, and ask His help in letting go of your pain and anger. Remember the times that you have been in need of forgiveness, and what it meant to you.

Make the conscious choice to forgive. There is often a sense of lack of control when feeling hurt by someone. The choice to let go and move on with your life is yours and yours alone.

It is not necessary to communicate your decision to forgive to the person who hurt you, but it is important that you concretely state for yourself that you are forgiving the individual. You may want to light a candle or perform some other symbolic, concrete act.

When all is said and done, remember that forgiving is about letting go of the pain and moving on. It's not about forgetting what happened or putting yourself at risk at being hurt by the same person again. What happened can not be undone, but you can choose to put it behind you.

Remember the words of the Bible,

“Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.”

Ephesians 4:32

What is a Real Mom?

"...children are a crown to the aged, and parents are the pride of their children."

Proverbs 17:6

In the beginning of this book I talked about why I titled it "Real Moms' Devotions to Go". "Real moms," I said, "know that being perfect isn't what it's all about." Real moms understand that raising healthy and happy kids is what's important. Well, I may have simplified things a bit.

While I was writing this book, I got a call from a woman who was working with a Hospice organization. We talked about the caring that goes on within families when a loved one is terminally ill, and how difficult dealing with end-of-life issues can be. Parenting is a continuum it seems. It never really ends. Parents parent children, and when old age comes, children parent parents. Being a mom isn't really just about raising children. It goes far beyond that, extending into something deeply profound after the "job" is technically done.

A mom learns early on that sleepless nights are a part of the deal, from night feedings with infants to listening for the teen's car to enter the garage at one in the morning. Being a mom is physically demanding.

A mom teaches her child, and even when grown, a child still needs a mother's knowledge. Being a mom is being a teacher.

A mom puts her own wants and needs second to those of her child's, but when that child is grown, that standard still applies. Being a mom is about self-sacrifice.

A mom worries from the time a child is conceived...and it never stops. Being a mom is about fear and stress.

A mom tires, hurts, questions, gets angry, and feels enormous stress. However, even under all of those conditions, a real mom endures, perseveres, and overcomes her own trials in order to serve those she loves. A real mom nurtures, teaches, forgives, and gives from her heart even when it's breaking. The enduring feature of a real mom is that she does, in fact, never stop. A mom shoulders her responsibility with courage and honor, never faltering. Her love is one of continuing fortitude.

If I sound a bit romantic when describing moms, it's because I do see them in a romantic, yet I think realistic light. I think moms are unsung heroes in this world. I may not see myself in that light, but I know that I've seen many others that way.

I've seen moms at the bedsides of children recovering from surgery, sleeping upright just so they could hold their child's hand as they promised they would.

I've seen a mom who gave up a high-paid, glamorous job to stay home and care for her son when he suffered a spinal cord injury.

I remember a mom who faced with a choice to shorten her life or increase the chances of bringing her pregnancy to term, chose her child's life.

I've seen moms who shuttle their kids from activity to activity looking as if they haven't eaten, slept or combed their own hair. Being a mom is about giving.

I believe that love's true expression is one of sacrifice. In a mother's love, we see it exemplified in the selfless giving of mother to child. My Hospice conversation reminded me that being a mom doesn't end with adulthood. Even as death closes our eyes for the last time, we continue to be someone's mom, and they in turn (if we are fortunate), are there to "mother" us. It's part of a continuum that God surely created to teach us about love in its purest form, for where else in this world, and in what other form, could we possibly ever see and understand such a profound and enduring expression of love.

So as I close this book with one last thought, let it be to remind you that no matter how difficult this job of parenting is at times, or how stressed out you get, you are blessed beyond measure to be a mom. Even when you feel like hanging your head in despair, hold your head high instead. You mom, just by being a “real mom”, are a hero.

Prayer: Lord, thank you for blessing me with the job of motherhood. Amen.

Time to Mother Mom

The Power of Prayer

The power of prayer has been documented as being an effective tool in managing stress. It is, in fact, often seen as a form of meditation where one can focus and achieve a deeper sense of relaxation.

You can, of course, come up with your own individualized prayers, but the Bible also has some wonderful areas to guide you. The book of Psalms is a great place to start. Examples of Bible prayers can be found in Psalm 63:1-3 and 2 Corinthians 1:3-5.

The use of meditation has been discussed earlier in this book, but if you add prayer to it, you will find a unique form of communication with God that focuses your attention more completely on Him. Colossians 4:2 tells us, “Devote yourselves to prayer...”. What better advice could you have? Bring your troubles to God, feel His healing power wash over you, and you can find relief from your stress.

I hope this book has been helpful to you in coming to a clearer understanding of yourself as a mom and a deeper relationship with God. My prayer for you is that you gain control over the stress in your life and lead a stronger, more contented life as a Christian mother. God bless you.