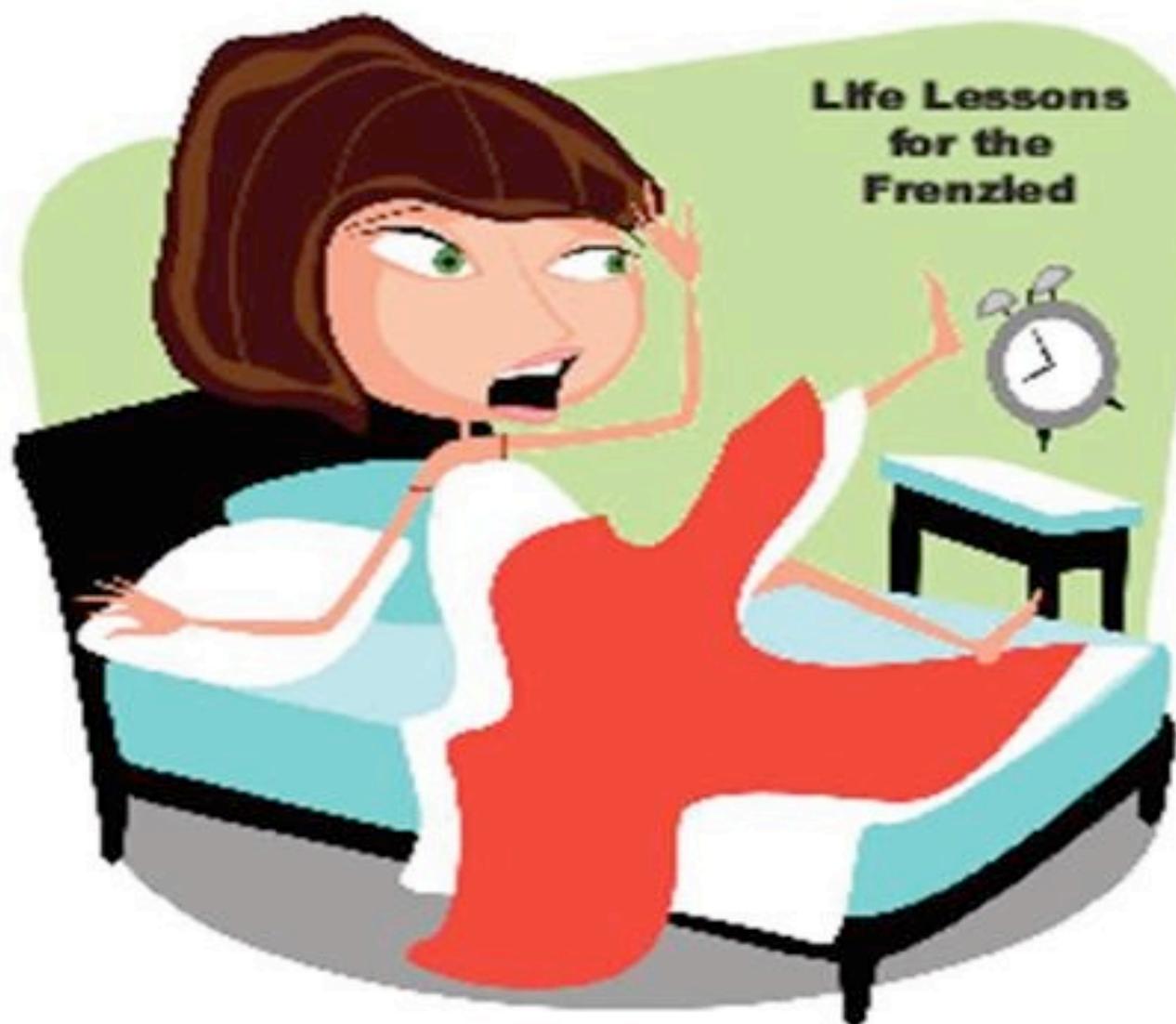


Stressed Out Moms' Devotions to Go



Life Lessons
for the
Frenzied

Kathy Pride

Moms' Devotions to Go Series

Stressed Out Moms' Devotions to Go

Life Lessons for the Frenzied

Kathy Pride

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If It's Not One Thing It's Your Mother

Honor your father and mother so that you may live long in the land the LORD your God is giving you. Exodus 20:12

“Done!” announced my daughter from the other room where she sat perched on the piano bench, ready to make a quick getaway.

“No, one more time... I think it could still use a little work” I answered, returning my attention to the kitchen sink which had a spoon stuck in the garbage disposal.

My mother, not to be left out of the conversation added her two cents: “A little work? Sounds to me like it needs more than a little work.”

I sighed in exasperation, not sure if it was more in response to my daughter or my mother.

“Just one Mommy, OK? One more time” came my daughter’s answer, followed by notes resembling “Oh Come Oh come Emmanuel.”

I poked my finger down the sink garbage disposal and tried to get the stuck spoon dislodged without success.

“How long are you going to have her take lessons?” my mother asked, her tone of voice clearly indicating she thought piano lessons were a waste of money.

“I think she’s lost interest, she doesn’t seem to enjoy practicing.”

“Done mommy, OK?” my daughter chirped from the other room.

“It’s sounding better, why don’t you do it again?” I answered, still trying to free the stuck spoon.

“M-ahhhhhhhhh-meee, I don’t want to” came the perfectly mastered whine of a ten year old.

“Oh well” I answered matter-of-factly, thinking it would be helpful if Emmanuel came right now.

“One more time please.”

“One, just one?” my mother interjected, her pitch rising along with her eyebrows. “I think you’re wasting your money on lessons.”

I sighed again certain it was audible to my mother who would use it as ammunition to bolster her point. “Why doesn’t she take lessons from the same teacher who teaches her friend who was over the one day...she was playing much better... and by memory.”

“She does just fine with her teacher” I answered, “She is gentle and encouraging.” I added and continued to dig for the lodged spoon. “And, she thinks she’s doing just fine.”

I changed the subject to my own days of instrument practice.

“I hated practicing, too, you know” I casually commented. “Did you know I used to re-set the timer after it started so I could cut my practice short.”

My mother was shocked.

“Why are you so surprised?” I asked. “All kids, or just about all of them don’t like practicing. I would rather she have a gentle soul than a drill sergeant for a teacher.”

My mother remained unconvinced and merely commented, “Well, how much longer are you having her continue?” She had been asking the question ever since her granddaughter started taking lessons.

I sidestepped the question and made a vague comment about the importance of knowing how to read music and how it is one of those skills she will thank me for later in life.

Why is it our moms have the ability to get under our skin? I know I'm not alone in this. Sometimes I think it's because we are so alike. They leave us a legacy that is a mixed bag. There are many days I wake up and think, “Oh my, I am my mother after all.” If I'm nagging my daughter about practicing the piano I am more likely to accomplish just the opposite.

On the other hand, my mom has lots of great qualities I would be wise to emulate: my mom is loyal, committed, helpful and a fierce protector to the end of the Earth, just like our Abba Father. And in modeling those attributes we honor both God and our parents.

Prayer: God, thank you for my mom and everything I get from her, good and bad. Help me let her know that despite mother daughter squabbles I love her. I really need to tell her this more often, because one day I won't be able to. Despite sometimes fighting like cats and dogs, I need to let her know I will guard and care for her (if and when she needs it) with the same fierce protection I have received from her. Help me figure out how to only pass along the good stuff to my girls. Amen

Action Step

List five habits you have picked up from your mother that you love, and five that you can't stand. Which do you do more often? Brainstorm alternative behaviors to the habits you would like to change. Begin each day by thinking about the positive traits you wish to emulate and list one strategy for each.

I've Lost my Marbles

“And you, my son Solomon, acknowledge the God of your father, and serve him with wholehearted devotion and with a willing mind, for the LORD searches every heart and understands every motive behind the thoughts. If you seek him, he will be found by you; but if you forsake him, he will reject you forever. 1 Chronicles 28:9

“I’ll never find it in this mess” I thought to myself, searching for a specific item. I couldn’t even get the closet open, let alone inch my way past the layers of miscellaneous items that had no permanent home other than “the closet.”

This is no ordinary closet, but a large walk in closet connected to our college son’s bedroom. Translation: it doesn’t get used by him, so I took it over and its “design and function” was closely patterned after my kitchen junk drawer.

Now, I have the best organizational intentions; after all I bought an expandable cutlery organizer for my kitchen drawer to catch everything from re-chargeable batteries to rubber bands, to candle votives to pennies. It gives me the illusion of order in an area that has always had anything but.

A cutlery organizer was fine for the junk drawer, but there was no equivalent or hope for the closet.

The disorganization presented a real problem for me when I decided to search for the hand glass blown musical note I wanted to give the piano teacher as a Christmas gift.

“I’ll never find it” I thought again...but unlike last year I decided not to give up and started to clean the closet, vowing I wouldn’t give up until I had found the missing musical note. Never mind that I had several more pressing priorities on “the list.”

“I wonder what else I’ll find in the process,” I mused. Typically searches for one thing yielded several unexpected finds.

The contents of the closet resembled a seven layer salad, the top layer made up of all kinds of wool. Two trips to China and one trip to Greece had netted quite a collection of yarn without a permanent home. The closet became the homeless shelter.

It was also the holding tank for all of my “bargain” shopping. I absolutely cannot resist a 75% off sale and accumulate items whether I need them or not. Yard sales where new items are on display are another temptation.

Suffice it to say I had a formidable “gift closet.” The only problem was I hadn’t given any of the gifts away in several years. I unearthed several Christmas ornaments, picture frames, games, a model airplane and ant hill which I placed in a pile headed for the Ronald McDonald House. But no glass musical note.

Jackets, pillows and blankets were next.

Next came books, several year’s worth of back issues to Snowboarder magazine and 17 baseball hats, followed by three duffel bags the cats had decided to pee on months ago. Trash.

But still no musical note.

By now I had uncovered a 3’ X 2’ area of rug, proving to me there was a floor at the bottom of the pile after all.

Then I made my first unexpected discovery: An American Girl doll outfit I forgot I had and two Cheetah Girls CD’s. I had scored. Big time!

Several full garbage bags later, some for donation and some for the landfill, I had confirmed that there really was wall-to-wall carpeting in the entire closet, and then I finally saw it, the small cardboard box that contained the blown glass musical note. Equally fragile as a robin's egg I didn't hold out much hope for its intact survival at the bottom of the heap.

I reached for the box and opened it carefully. The absurdity of this struck me as it had been covered with pounds of stuff for the past two years.

And it was broken.

I sighed and put it in one of the bags destined for the trash.

I reflected on the time and energy I had spent looking for this one item. I imagined God spending a lot of time and energy looking for us when we are lost in a pile of rubble. I shuddered to think that He spent as much time looking for me as I spent looking for lost and misplaced stuff!

Certainly He is persistent; as persistent as I was that day. But the difference is when He finds us, even though we are often cracked, broken and burdened by incredible weight, He doesn't throw us away. He takes us just the way we are, as hopelessly broken as we look and feel and piece by piece mends us and makes us whole again.

Prayer: God, please, please help me be less attached to my stuff. Stuff can never replace people or relationships. I don't want my stuff to end up being a distraction that takes me away from time with my family or with you. I'm not sure I always know how to spend time with you, God, so please help me with that too.

Amen

Action Step

The next time you hit a mega sale, before you buy anything, ask yourself if it will really make a great gift for someone specific, or if you are making the purchase only because it is a “great deal.” Only add items to your gift closet when you have specific recipients in mind.

Create a Master Gift list for Christmas, birthdays and anniversaries and carry it with you in your purse so you can keep track of purchases as you make them. I routinely shop the 75% off after Christmas sale but it is still important to document for whom you are buying and what you have purchased.

Hurry Up and Wait

...being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience... Colossians 1:11

I arrived at the Philadelphia airport with over two hours to spare. I had plenty of time to prepare myself for tonight's trip to the west coast and looked forward to the flight time to catch up on reading and writing.

But for the moment I had some time to kill. "What should I do?" I wondered. Eat? Shop? Talk to friends on the phone, uninterrupted? All of the above?

I decided on all of the above: A salad at TGI Friday's, a chat with my son and a stop at Brookstone for my free in store massage. Then off to my gate, via the coffee kiosk where I ordered a Venti skinny decaf caramel latte. Whatever happened to plain old decaf?

I cut my time a little bit short, trying to do it all and found myself loping to the gate balancing two carry-on bags, a heavy laptop (my husband thought I needed the 17" screen as I had been showing signs of farsightedness) and my Venti latte. The wheeled suitcase was light, but the other bag, slung over my shoulder, was sure to give me tendinitis.

I arrived at my gate out of breath and with fresh coffee stains splattered all over my clean jeans only to discover my flight was delayed, despite "on time" listed on the departure board.

Passengers overflowed out of the waiting area and sat on the floor, several with portable electronic devices huddled around the too few available electrical outlets.

Bits and pieces of tonight's hurry up and wait story fell into place.

Bad weather on the west coast delayed the inbound flight creating a domino effect on the turnaround. Strong head winds necessitated more fuel. A weight restriction had also been placed on the flight. (No wonder; it was the Monday after Thanksgiving and, if you multiplied the traditional turkey weight gain of 3 pounds by 172 passengers, it added up). Not to mention extra luggage stuffed with black Friday shopping.

I sighed and settled into a seat recently vacated by an exasperated fellow traveler who somehow thought if they went to hassle the gate agent it would expedite things.

Hurry up and wait.

Then finally the airline had a plan. At ten, an hour and a half after we were scheduled to depart, we started boarding. But tonight we would be flying from Philadelphia to Portland via Las Vegas, (review your geography, it's not exactly on the way...) for a re-fueling stop. Fuel is heavy, by the way, and we didn't have enough to make it to Portland.

So, rather than a nice leisurely evening flight which had allowed me to spend the day with my daughters, I ended up with a reverse red eye. It's not every day you get a red eye flying from east to west.

By the time we arrived in Portland it was daybreak; night had come and gone and instead of a downy soft bed I spent the night in the middle seat of row 16.

It's like that with prayer, too. There is a lot of hurry up and wait involved with prayer.

I have discovered that God's answers typically fall into one of three categories: yes, no or slow.

Kind of like on-time departures and ahead of time arrivals; cancelled flights or reverse red eyes!

Sure, I would love immediate answers to prayer, or flight schedules that always reflect on time departures and ahead-of-schedule arrivals, but unfortunately that isn't often the case.

But I will take "hurry up and wait" over "no" any day!

Prayer: God, why am I such a control freak? Why do I always want my way and resent interruptions when they come my way? Please help me accept and even embrace the circumstances of my life, good and bad, and help me learn from each one of those experiences. And I hope I'm a fast learner! Amen

Action Step

There are several ways to make air travel more enjoyable, or at least more productive if you are faced with delays or cancellations.

Always carry your toothbrush and toothpaste in a baggy on your carry-on.

Travel with a travel pillow, an eye mask and ear plugs. You never know when they may come in handy.

Take back-up reading material.

If you have phone calls to catch up on, take a copy of your local phone book and put the down time to good use getting those nuisance phone calls out of the way.

Running on Empty

It is better not to vow than to make a vow and not fulfill it. Ecclesiastes 5:5

The phone rang at precisely 8:17, right on cue.

It was my walking buddy Lorraine announcing that she was running late because she and her daughter had forgotten it was dress down day at her daughter's school, and with too many options to select from and the ultimate choice being a wrinkled mess, they were running behind.

"Could we walk half an hour later this morning?" She asked, certain it wouldn't be a problem, but today it was. I had scheduled myself too tightly and didn't have any wiggle room.

"No, actually, I can't" I answered, and barely coming up for a breath, rattled off my morning's agenda.

"I have to drop off a check for last year's taxes with the accountant, take seven bags of donations to the women's center, weigh in at LA Weight Loss, pick up my free Thanksgiving turkey with the coupon that expires tomorrow..." I paused briefly, came up for a breath and continued, "then drop the turkey off at the Red Cross and stop at the Cingular store. Then I have to finish packing; we leave for Honduras tonight," I added as an afterthought, startling myself that our departure date had crept up, "and finish the evening off at the House of Hope banquet. Oh, and I have to pick the girls up at school and take them to their piano lesson."

I got tired myself just thinking about the day ahead and wondered how late I would be to the banquet. I was still also trying to figure out how I would squeeze in some exercise, knowing I was more likely to find an excuse without my buddy.

I laced up my sneakers and decided to stick with the original plan of walking first and took off for an abbreviated solo version.

Next, I loaded the car with everything I needed and took off for Bloomsburg, pleased I had my day organized and that I would be able to slash things off my list.

I was feeling quite smug and pleased with my accomplishments until I looked at the gas gauge and quickly added "Stop at Gas Station" to my list.

Things were going fine till I got to the Cingular store (I even lost 1.8 pounds according to the scale at LA) and I realized that in my haste I had neglected to grab the charger to the phone I was returning. And I had to return it today, my thirty day grace period was about to expire.

My busyness had caught up with me. I had been overly ambitious and my efficiency was about to go down the tube. Squeezing in "just one more thing" (actually more like five more things, all labeled as 'one more thing' five times) made me miss out on the two most important parts of my day, those that involved relationships: my walk with my friend, and my late arrival at the banquet. Not to mention I had started the day without time with God.

Oh sure, I had hurried through five or six Bible passages, quite pleased with myself, but I hadn't really absorbed any of it and certainly didn't hear God speak to me. I was too busy to listen! I added a quick cursory prayer and got on with my day that proceeded to fall apart almost immediately.

I was running on empty both spiritually and physically, scheduling myself so tightly I hadn't left any wiggle room to accommodate unexpected events or to hear from God. Instead of being more productive, I had set myself up for chaos and irritation. And that's not what God wants for us!

Prayer: God, help me slow down and not continue my insane habit of frantic and frenetic scheduling. Help me slow down and not be so compulsive. I know I should but don't seem able to make positive changes. I need your help, because I can't do it. Amen

Action Step

Do you have a mission statement for your life? Do your priorities and values line up with how you spend your time?

If you don't have a mission statement, spend some time developing one and then use the mission statement as a filter for all the decisions you make about how to spend your time. If an activity doesn't line up with your mission statement, say "no."

Purge and Prune

He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. John 15:2

As a result of the “Running on Empty” phenomenon, I recently launched a new campaign: The Purge and Prune campaign, designed to purge possessions and prune commitments. The goal is to allow for more simplicity, increased joy and decreased stress. And definitely more time with my family.

It is a slow process and I have a long way to go.

I am learning that this is just as much a spiritual exercise as it is physical.

After all, I’m attached to my stuff. Am I really ever going to finish the birth announcement cross stitch sampler I started for my now 24-year-old son over 20 years ago? No! Yet until three weeks ago I couldn’t part with it.

And what about my middle aged body and the clothes I will never squeeze into again, despite my LA weight loss goals? I finally have come to terms with the fact that it is unreasonable to try to weigh what I did as a teenager, a fantasy, but not a reasonable reality.

And commitments; they need to be pruned just like my husband’s fruit trees. (A gardener I am not). When he prunes them and cuts away the dead wood, the resulting growth and fruit are phenomenal.

I have learned that the device used for effectively pruning commitments is not a pair of shears but a simple two letter word that cuts away extraneous branches (distractions). It is the word “No”. Easy to form but difficult to say.

But both purging and pruning get easier with repetition. It is helpful to keep an eternal perspective when it comes to a P&P campaign, which is where its spiritual application comes in.

We've all heard the saying, "You can't take it with you." Stuff won't go with you when you die, and it's more important where you go when you die than how much stuff you leave behind (although you may have a relative or two who disagree).

That's where the pruning comes in. Pruning commitments from our daily schedule allows us to focus on items of lasting significance and to store up treasures in Heaven. Spend time loving and serving your family and others, read some great romance out of the Song of Solomon (instead of smut from the bookstore) or write to a prisoner instead of IMing or chatting with online "friends" you have never met.

Embark on a P&P campaign of your own and enjoy the benefits: more time, (less of which is spent searching for, taking care of or putting away stuff), more money (you buy less stuff, you spend less money) and more joy. You can never have it all or do it all anyway, so why not just stop trying and give yourself permission to simply be.

Prayer: God, I really, really have a hard time saying no to people and things. I really don't want more stuff, even when I think I do, because I usually still end up dissatisfied. I don't want to covet and envy what others have, it usually ends up making me and others feel bad. Help me recognize and be thankful for all I have in my life. And please help me de-clutter! I need super human help for that task! Amen

Action Step

There are several great books and resources on managing and conquering clutter. One I particularly like is Katherine Porter's De-Cluttering your Heart and Home with several practical suggestions and spiritual tie-ins.

Conquer clutter one step at a time and be ruthless. Start with one small area and devote fifteen minutes each day to that one area. As you de-clutter your home you will also find your heart has more space also.

Where's Martha When you Need Her?

But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She came to him and asked, "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!" Luke 10:40

I really don't care if you give me Martha Stewart or Martha, Mary's sister, just as long as I get some good household help.

I have to admit I have an envy problem when it comes to household help. And Proverbs says envy "rots the bones."

I have lots of friends who have cleaning help on a regular basis, and I would like to join their ranks. But for the time being I try to content myself with sporadic help; after all, it's better than nothing. In the meantime I continue to ponder whatever possessed me to put a white tile floor in my kitchen.

The purging and pruning helps, but isn't a substitute for Martha.

Visions of simple décor and help bustling around my (clean) kitchen hold tremendous appeal, but I was reminded one day that, just like the passage in Luke shows, relationships are more important.

Sometimes the dinner hour is referred to as the witching hour in our house. Tired and hungry kids are possessed by cranky spirits and all of a sudden the simplest of tasks becomes hard and time consuming. There are times even microwaving a hot dog can become a major ordeal.

My girls were whining and on the verge of crying; the cat had just thrown up and the phone was ringing and I had managed to explode yet another hot dog in the microwave. Papers were scattered all over the kitchen

island and daughter number one couldn't find her spelling words, which for some reason had to be reviewed right now.

Then came the icing on the cake: the doorbell rang, and a friend of mine was standing at my front door to return a book she had borrowed.

Yet without thinking, (after all, this is how my house is, it is lived in not only by us but our pets and several dust bunnies as well) I opened the door and ushered her inside.

"Karen, come in, come in," I said as I backed up and made room for her to come in.

She immediately experienced the chaos of my home: a retching cat, a beeping microwave, water boiling over on the stove (I wasn't having any better luck with spaghetti than I was with hot dogs) and squabbling kids.

"Come on in" I said. She hesitated, taking in the commotion, but was convinced by the smile I extended her.

"I just came to return this book," and she handed me my copy of *Bringing up Boys* which I wished was re-titled *Bringing up Girls*. Maybe it would help with the high drama shenanigans going on in the other room.

We chatted for a few minutes until it was time for her to leave to pick up her son from middle school basketball practice.

And back to the mayhem at hand.

One by one I got through cleaning up the cat mess, serving reasonable spaghetti (not overcooked and stuck together), the dog got the last hot dog and voice mail answered the phone. The girls stopped whining once they had something to eat, and my daughter even mastered spelling "exhausted," which we all were.

Several weeks later I ran into my friend Karen at the grocery store.

She waved from across a neatly stacked display of Progresso soups and came over and reached for my arm.

“I have to tell you something,” she said. She gently placed her hand on my forearm and asked, “Do you remember the day I stopped by to return the Bringing up Boys book?”

I chuckled out loud. “How could I forget?”

“Well, I just want to tell you how much your hospitality meant to me.”

Hospitality? I thought to myself. I didn't remember offering her gloppy spaghetti or an exploded hot dog.

“I stopped by at a busy time of day and only wanted to drop the book off, yet you threw open the front door and welcomed me into your home. You didn't seem at all phased by the fact that there were extra kids at your house and you were trying to get them something to eat. You were obviously juggling a lot. You made me feel special. You made me feel like I was the only one there.”

She paused for a moment and then simply said, “Thank you; that was such a gift.”

I looked at her with a quizzical look on my face, not quite understanding.

“Oh, I could never have done that. My house has to be perfect or I won't let anyone in. And I am losing out on relationships.”

She seemed to be lost somewhere far away in thought and then returned to the moment and nodded her head and gave my arm a little squeeze. “Thank you.”

And I thought of Jesus and Mary. And that day, despite wanting a Martha, I had been a Mary and was thankful that I had been given the opportunity to serve in a way pleasing to Christ.

Prayer: God, help me be more like Martha (and I don't mean Martha Stewart, either!) I really don't want to worry about appearances, but focus more on being a good friend. Help me be welcoming and a good listener. The dust bunnies will always be there, and if my friends are coming to see them instead of me...then let me also learn from that. Help me put people first. There are always so many things to do, I need help with this. Thank you. Amen

Action Step

This week identify two or three other friends you can pair up with to clean. With two people it goes twice as fast! If you have a group of three, two can clean together, and the third can watch children who are not in school, and this arrangement can be continued on a cyclical basis.

Also consider getting together with girlfriends once a month and cook some meals in bulk for all of you to share. You can split the cost of groceries, each person can concentrate on what they cook well, and only one kitchen needs to be cleaned up!

Meals on Wheels

Better a meal of vegetables where there is love than a fattened calf with hatred. Proverbs 15:17

When I was growing up there was a popular commercial on TV that asked, "It's ten o'clock. Do you know where your children are?" My current version is, "It's four o'clock. Do you know where your dinner is?"

I have to admit the question brings me a renewed sense of dread every day.

By the time Oprah sashays out on to her stage every afternoon, if I haven't planned for dinner, (which nine times out of ten I have not), I know I have limited options.

Something to throw in the microwave, spaghetti (again) or Sheetz, our local gas station.

If only I had remembered to throw some things into the crock pot.

Honestly, I never thought I would be so excited about a gas station and the culinary possibilities: Quesadillas, meatball hoagies, salads and even an Espresso Bar.

My girls hope I have not planned ahead. Sheetz is just fine with them. They even have mastered ordering from the touch screen. Oh, did I mention they have the best cheese fries? And why is obesity in children becoming an epidemic? More guilt to heap on my head...cheese fries are full of calories and trans fats. Am I the same mom who mashed bananas in a food mill when my kids were babies so they would have unprocessed food?

Yet despite the convenience, I hate grab and go dinners.

I cling to the concept of family dinners, but there are problems with this dream.

Eight and ten-year-old hungry bellies don't wait for long work days to end to be fed.

So what's a mom to do? Become a short order cook? Run a soup kitchen? Or feed her kids at the gas station?

I covet a dinner time where there is a review of the day. Where conversation is punctuated by savoring the tastes of home-cooked meals. What I generally end up with is tired kids who are not interested in more food unless it is ice cream or some other cavity inducing alternative.

So we compromise and we pledge to eat two dinners (minimum) a week together regardless of what is served. And sometimes I bring the Sheetz food home.

But hearts also need to be fed and there is no substitute for the time spent together as a family. Love is the ingredient we all want. The food on the plate is secondary.

Prayer: God, thanks for the gift of family. Thanks also for the gift of lots of dinner options which include our local gas station. I don't want to feel guilty about getting dinner at a gas station. After all, it is just one more kind of fast food. I need to always remember that the most important ingredient is the time to sit down as a family. Amen

Action Step

With minimal organization, balanced meals can be served and enjoyed together as a family.

*Make one night each week pizza night and opt for delivery.

*When cooking something like a lasagna find a friend who makes another family-friendly dish and prepare double and swap. You get two meals for the prep time of one!

*Grab a rotisserie chicken, a bag salad and whip up some mashed potatoes and you have a great, quick meal.

* Start with the number of nights per week you know you can manage, even if it is only one or two.

One Ringie Dingie

I call on you, O God, for you will answer me; give ear to me and hear my prayer. Psalm 17:6

“It’s like Grand Central Station in here,” I muttered to myself, hanging up the phone.

I did not want to be solicited by yet another organization as the dinner hour approached.

But before I sat back down at the kitchen table to take another stab at second grade math the phone rang again.

My ten year old daughter answered the phone, “Hello, who is it please?”

“Mommy, it’s for you.”

So what else is new? I thought and pushed back the chair and stepped on the dog’s tail.

While the pencil rolled off the table and landed on the floor.

“Who is it?” I mouthed as I reached for the hand off of the cordless phone as if it were a baton in a track relay race.

My daughter squinted at the caller ID and said, “It says ‘Unknown’”

I groaned. Another plea for time or money... and I wasn’t sure which was worse.

I politely tried to extricate myself from the conversation Have you noticed tele-marketers rarely come up for breath? The pencil on the floor was now a toy for the cat and my second grade daughter had disappeared.

As soon as I got off the phone, I complimented my older daughter on her meticulous phone manners but begged her to look at the caller ID before picking up the phone and to let the voice mail answer if “Unknown” appeared on the caller ID screen.

Back to second grade math.

I crawled under the table to reclaim the pencil from the cat and corralled my daughter to finish her homework.

I hadn't been seated three minutes before the phone rang again. As if possessed by an alien being I screamed, “Don't answer it!”

But my older daughter walked over to the phone and announced that it was Matt, our 24 year old son. The caller ID said so.

I heaved a huge sigh. “OK, pick it up” I said. After all if I didn't talk to him now, it might be days. Guys that age seldom call their middle age mothers or answer their phones when their middle-aged mothers call.

After a brief conversation, my attention reverted back to second grade math which was posing several problems for me.

Somehow we managed to get through the math with no additional interruptions.

But I was grouchy from the multiple interruptions and distractions.

Interruptions and distractions don't only pull us away from our family and responsibilities but they also pull us away from God. Seemingly minor incidents and routine events become effective distraction strategies that draw us away from God. It requires discipline to ignore the distractions but the rewards are real: drawing closer to God and our kids.

Prayer: God, I think I must have ADD. I get really distracted, and to do lists whirl around in the back of my head. I don't want to be distracted, especially when I spend time with my kids. I always try to squeeze in one more thing. Help me overcome the distractions that interrupt my time with you and my family. In particular, let me to not be so compulsive about answering the phone when I am spending time with my kids. Amen

Action Step

Try not to answer the phone in the evenings, or at the very least let your caller ID screen your calls. Let your voice mail pick it up, demonstrating to your family that they come first. Also try to cut in half the amount of time you spend on your cell phone while you are driving your kids from activity to activity and use the time to interact with them instead.

Summiting Laundry Mountain

I lift up my eyes to the hills-where does my help come from? Psalm 121:1

I surveyed the laundry. Where did it all come from? There were dirty clothes everywhere...mostly on the floor; mismatched socks, soggy, smelly towels and wrong side out sweat shirts with clumps of grass stuck to them.

Forget molehills or rolling hills! What I had was a mountain the size of Everest and it was my job to scale it.

Never mind asking, "where did it come from?" I knew exactly where it came from: A day in the life of an ordinary family.

School clothes with spaghetti sauce down the front; socks that had been left in the back pack after the camping trip stiff with dry dirt; baseball and soccer uniforms with tell tale signs of slides and tackles; beach towels with sand and damp kitchen dish towels were just a few of the things that made up today's laundry mountain to summit.

But summiting this mountain would take specific tools and the precision of a mountaineer.

I selected my tools carefully. Flip flops for my feet so I wouldn't step in anything I didn't want to step in (you never know what might be lurking at the bottom of some of those pile). Laundry baskets to gather haphazardly strewn items. Detergent, bleach and fabric softener for whites, colors and delicates. Dryer sheets to give everything a fresh smell. More laundry baskets to put the clothes in once washed. If no one would use the baskets for dirty clothes, at least I could use them for the clean clothes!

And just when I thought I had reached the summit, another mountain appears next to the one just scaled: the mountain of clean laundry, requiring more tools: baskets, sorting and folding skills and a talent and propensity for finding missing socks the dryer eats.

Our spiritual journeys are also never-ending and can sometimes seem as daunting as summiting laundry mountain, especially if we don't give it on-going attention.

And that's why good tools and a plan are also necessary for our spiritual climb. Getting to know God works best if we use prayer and the Bible as tools for the journey as well as daily attention, so we don't end up feeling hopeless or getting lost.

So whether it is the laundry or any other daunting task that has you overwhelmed have a step by step plan and the proper tools and keep your eyes focused upward. The view from the top is beautiful!

Prayer: God, there are lots of mountains in my life, although the laundry is one that is most visible! Give me the strength to summit those mountains and enjoy the view from the top. Help me to keep going, even when I am totally exhausted. Amen

Action Step

A group hike is generally more fun than going it alone so get your family members involved in scaling “laundry mountain.” You will probably experience lots of resistance at first, but when mountain climbing for the first time, until those muscles develop, they will be sore!

Involve every family member who is old enough to participate and identify age appropriate goals; some will make it to the top (collect, wash, sort, fold and put away) and others may only make it to the first scenic vista (putting the laundry in a basket rather than on the floor). Regardless of their stage, adopt the disciplined approach to climbing laundry mountain: each person must master their level or discover the hazard of climbing unprepared when they don't have clean clothes. You won't have to climb alone anymore!

Penny Saved, Penny Earned, Penny Spent

Do not wear yourself out to get rich; have the wisdom to show restraint. Proverbs 23:4

I prefer the word “frugal” to cheap. I also prefer to think about making wise financial choices (not spending more than necessary or looking for the best bargain) as being good stewards of our financial resources.

I am a big fan of thrift stores and getting bumped whenever possible when I travel by air. I quip that getting bumped is one of my financial contributions to the family economy.

My most successful bumping venture occurred several years ago when I was traveling with my oldest son and youngest daughter, an infant at the time. We were returning from Hawaii and landed in LA on their second busiest day in air traffic history. It was so wild the local TV station was there shooting footage for their evening news.

I immediately sniffed out the bump potential and introduced myself to the gate agent. I knew the routine well, ready to put my script into action.

“If you need volunteers, there are two of us traveling who would be happy to give up our seats,” I opened the conversation with the frazzled gate agent. One flight to Philadelphia had just been grounded due to mechanical difficulties and the flight we were on was oversold.

He peered at us over his glasses and half said, half questioned “really?” the entire time typing furiously.

I nodded, stating that we would be happy to be accommodated on the next flight. This was a win-win situation; we got two free tickets, and the gate agent was able to find seats for two displaced passengers.

In the next twenty four hours we repeated this same scenario three more times, yielding eight free round-trip airline tickets which are, in fact, transferable. Voila, airline tickets for our entire family anywhere in the United States or Canada.

The free airline tickets represented more than a penny saved, allowing us to use our earned pennies to spend on a family vacation that otherwise would have been outside the budget. It appeared God was smiling down at us.

There are lots of examples of where a “penny saved” becomes a “penny earned” and how God uses those situations to bless us.

Prayer: God, help me stretch my budget in ways I never thought possible. In fact, help me manage money so well even my depression era mother would be impressed. I want to teach my children they can't get everything they want and they need to learn how to manage money well also. And then help me help others. Amen

Action Step

Are there areas in your budget that you can trim? There is always a trade-off between time and money but why not tailor what you serve your family as meals to the local supermarket's sales circular? If you have only shopped at your local Salvation Army for Halloween or the school play, expand your horizons and see what wardrobe choices you can find for all the members of your family. You may be surprised at the number of new with tags still on items that you may find.

Shop Till You Drop

Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; his love endures forever. Psalm 107:1

OK, I love to shop, but I am getting better at curbing my shopaholic tendencies. I still adopt the frugal-meister approach which my daughters haven't quite bought in to yet, but I do enjoy shopping. I just enjoy looking more than I enjoy buying. Unfortunately my girls enjoy buying more than looking.

I'm glad they weren't with me recently when an acquaintance recounted her recent escapades of a day of shopping in New York City. I have to admit that I had to leave the coffee hour early because I couldn't absorb any more of the conversation. Part of it was admittedly covetousness which I have not yet overcome, but part of it was the intolerance I have developed to shopping as a hobby (unless it is at a bargain spot).

"Oh, it was just the most amazing day," the woman began.

"First we got off the bus and took a cab to the American Girl Place." Immediately my mind filled with several well coordinated outfits for dolls that cost more than I routinely spent on my own wardrobe.

"My girls were just so taken with NY that they had their noses plastered to the window and were taking pictures from the cab."

She continued, slipping into a steady tempo of recounting her day in New York City. "We must have spent over \$100 in cab fare, we had to go back and do more shopping later in the day, just a couple more goodies."

"Yeah," chuckled another friend. "Just a couple more goodies...you should have seen how many bags they had, they couldn't fit them over their seats."

The group that gathered for coffee was mostly a group of mothers of girls, and conversation shifted to American Girl dolls, their wardrobe and accessories.

But my mind wandered to a different mother and daughter. A couple of years earlier I had passed a mother and daughter on a Chicago street corner just half a block away from American Girl Place. The mother and daughter on the street were dressed not in matching outfits, (many of the girls at American Girl Place were dressed to match the doll they were clutching) but rather in tattered dresses. They didn't hold shopping bags with doll outfits nicer than they would ever wear, but rather a tin can with a few loose coins that represented their food money for the day.

The contrast between the mothers and daughters separated by half a city block was striking.

The conversation continued around me and I thought about another mom and her daughter, friends of mine who have had a hard life. The \$100 my coffee sipping acquaintance spent on cab fare in an afternoon could have put a month's worth of gas in my friend's car.

And then a funny thing happened. The envy I had felt earlier disappeared, my covetous meter stopped ticking. I felt more embarrassed about shopping I have done myself at American Girl Place and excused myself from the coffee gathering.

I didn't need to shop, but I did need to drop, to my knees.

Prayer: God, help me not to envy other people and their stuff. Help me focus on the many blessings I do have and live more in the present, instead of wishing for things I don't have. I know I do this and want that to change. Amen

Action Step

Most of us spend more money than we realize on unnecessary or soon forgotten or discarded items.

Commit to documenting every penny you spend during one week, down to the 50 cents for the gumball machine and \$4.17 for the Starbucks latte. Then take a highlighter and highlight everything you could live without. How many of the purchases were impulse buys? For the purchases you did make, were there more economical alternatives available? Now add up how much money you needlessly spent. Why not start to funnel some of those pennies towards making a difference in someone else's life? You may even have enough left over to start a vacation fund!

Am I a Broken Record?

A quarrelsome wife is like a constant dripping on a rainy day; restraining her is like restraining the wind or grasping oil with the hand. Proverbs 27:15

“Put your laundry away.”

“Did you finish your homework?”

“What about your piano?”

“Not until after all your work is done!”

I haven't quite figured out the after school routine yet and how to make a pleasant transition from school-life to home-life without sounding like the Queen of Nag.

I don't want to sound like a broken record; I don't want to be quarrelsome, but my good intentions don't generally win as I greet my girls, fresh though the door from a day at school with a barrage of questions geared more towards the part of the day that is yet to come than the part of the day they have just finished. My demeanor and words are more quarrelsome than they are peaceful. Perhaps I need an attitude adjustment...

When am I going to learn? When will I learn that greeting them with a pleasant break and genuine interest in how their day has gone is much more pleasing to everyone than an immediate inquiry in a somewhat nasal tone of voice that clearly identifies me as a nag?

I don't want to continue nagging as a family legacy or tradition, although I'm not doing well in that department either. If I am the Queen of Nag, my mother is the Queen Mother of Nag and my girls are the Crowned Princesses, already learning from my example...

So back to that attitude adjustment...I wonder how often God rolls His all-knowing eyes at me and agrees, "that girl needs an attitude adjustment."

But He knows me better than I know myself. And He is no stranger to imperfect humans throughout history who required attitude adjustments.

The next time my girls come bounding through the door after school, let me be a bit less quarrelsome and a bit more agreeable and allow this to be an expression of my worship to the God who made me and who can also change me.

Prayer: God, I hate being a nag, (really) and don't like it when the nagging and whiny tone creeps in. Help me keep my mouth shut when I am tempted to nag. Instead of nagging, help me somehow to be an encourager. I will probably need your help coming up with encouragement strategies also but I know with you all things are possible, and I need a lot of help. Amen

Action Step

Most of us don't really hear ourselves accurately. You need to ask a trusted friend to critique your communication. Better yet, set up a tape recorder sometime to hear for yourself what others hear when you are making a request. Do you repeat yourself? Is your tone of voice harsh? Are you asking or demanding?

I'd Rather Have a Maid than be a Servant

And the Lord's servant must not quarrel; instead, he must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful. 2

Timothy 2:24-25

Exactly 23 minutes were left before the school bus would arrive. Depending on how energetic and sociable my girls were, I might be able to squeeze an extra 90 seconds out of phase three of my day.

Phase three? What happened to one and two?

Phase one is before the kids get up in the morning and no matter how well disciplined or prepared, it is always too short and there is never enough time.

Phase two is the chunk of time (also not long enough) when the kids are at school. Inevitably, whether you work inside, outside or around the house, this phase overflows with demands on your time.

Work, laundry, shopping for diorama supplies, scooping the litter box and looking for the receipt lost deep in the junk drawer are all part of the daily routine.

That leads to phase three, the after school phase which also overflows with demands or commitments: homework (punishment for parents, if you ask me), dance, gymnastics, phone calls, sibling squabbles, piano practice and the computer chirping "You've got mail." All in addition to the never ending question of what to have for dinner.

With roughly twenty four and a half minutes left before entering the next phase of my day, I scrambled to try to figure out how to get the most bang per minute.

“If only I had help” I muttered...then getting two or three things done at the same time would be possible. A maid would be nice...and I promptly squandered the next six minutes and 45 seconds hosting a pity party for myself. But the cat spewing a hairball at my feet quickly brought me back to reality.

“A maid?” I’d love one, but get real. And even if I did have a maid, there still would be a gazillion things left on the “to do” list.

But a servant? Uh-huh, now that’s more like it. Unfortunately that would be me. No one helps around here, they dump their stuff everywhere, expect hot cooked meals, want me to have all the answers to life’s questions including such elusive queries as to why the life cycle of a turtle and snake are different if they both lay eggs.

I felt a reprise of the pity party coming on...this time with a bit of attitude.

As I leaned down to clean up the cat puke that by now was oozing between my toes I thought of the servant hood of Jesus.

As I washed between my toes, I thought of Jesus washing his Disciples’ feet and the great act of service that he demonstrated, minus the pity party.

We would all like more help to handle the multiple stressors, obligations and commitments we face every day. Instead of succumbing to a pity party, ranting and raving and snapping at everyone, it is more productive to focus on the help that is available to us through God’s power.

“Mom, we’re home!” my older daughter announced as she burst through the laundry room door and left a trail of backpack, shoes, socks and jacket behind her as she headed directly to the cabinet to peruse the after-school snack options. Her announcement was punctuated by the high pitched chatter prattle of my younger daughter, who also left a trail of belongings behind her.

Phase three of my day. Here we go, but this time, even though I still would rather have a maid, I approached the remainder of my day with a servant's heart.

Prayer: God, help me be more of a servant, putting others first. If I am honest, I know I am pretty selfish most of the time and I know it would be a happier place for everyone if that changed. Thank you! Amen

Action Step

It is often easier to clean someone else's home than your own, so why not consider swapping kids and swapping cleaning responsibilities with a friend once a week? Take turns cleaning and watching the kids. While your kids have a chance to play with other kids you will have a chance to cultivate an attitude of service as you help your friend clean rather than complain about your domestic chaos.

Juggling for Dummies

Anyone, then, who knows the good he ought to do and doesn't do it, sins. James 4:17

I'm not sure if there is a book by this title, but I could lend it a new twist. Instead of seeing how many balls I can successfully keep going at one time, it would be: How many commitments can I successfully juggle even when I am out of town?

Some days I juggle better than others.

But unlike traditional jugglers, the things I juggle are different sizes and shapes. Parent permission forms, lunch money, clean softball uniforms, white, not pink, ballet tights, birthday party RSVP's, dance recital dress rehearsal, work conference calls, writing deadlines, vet appointments and sending a much needed item to my son at college by priority mail.

There's also a second twist on traditional juggling: items that swirl around in my head and require attention that never seem to make it on to the "to do" list but waft in and out of consciousness. Did I remember to call this week's car pool driver for gymnastics and let her know we didn't need a ride? What about submitting those receipts for reimbursement? And on and on...

I am no expert in juggling, so why do I continue to think I can successfully manage keeping ten things going? I need to master two first...

I am happy to report that I just read a piece in USA Today on Beta Moms and I think I fit the mold. Beta Moms are mothers who routinely misplace or lose things, fly by the seat of their pants and sometimes even need to go into the school office to sign in a tardy child. (I recently did this while still in my jammies).

And guess what? The article told me it's OK. But did I really need to read that in USA Today to know that? Doesn't God tell me the same thing? That He loves me just the way I am and that I can't possibly achieve perfection because that only exists in Christ?

The only person I need to look to for approval is God. He reminded me that the most important item I need to juggle is love. After all, it's what cushions the fall when I drop all those balls.

Prayer: God, I have never been good at juggling. Please help me remember this so I don't try to do so many things that I start dropping balls left and right. I really want to juggle more using the word "no." I know I need help with this. Amen

Action Step

For the next month, develop the habit of learning to say “no” to all requests for your time. Then in the future, whenever you are asked to volunteer, help out or spearhead an event, don’t give an immediate answer. Always wait 24 hours before giving an answer, making sure to carefully weigh the pros and cons of the request remembering that you do not have to be all things to all people.

Mothering by Remote

Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. Philippians 4:6

The cell phone was ringing through the fog of my semi-conscious state. That's funny, I thought to myself...I don't remember setting the alarm on my phone. Then I realized it wasn't the alarm, it was an incoming call. I reached for the phone and glanced at the caller ID before answering. "Home Calling" appeared on the screen.

I have to admit that for a split second I was tempted not to answer. Half the time it seems like the purpose of the calls is to pull me in to a sisterly dispute that has no good resolution, especially from remote locations...

"Good Morning, Sunshine!" I answered the phone, speaking to my child who doesn't always have a sunny disposition.

"Mom...Mom...(Yes?)...Mom" she repeated, barely allowing me enough time to acknowledge I was on the phone.

"Mom" she continued insistently. "Yes, I'm listening" I answered, trying not to rush my words, encouraging her to get on with what she needed to tell me.

Then the words came tumbling out. "Erin wouldn't let me wear my jeans to softball, she said they were dirty and I was so mad, I locked myself in my room and didn't want to go."

It seems Erin, our oldest son's girlfriend, in charge of the afternoon logistics, decided our younger daughter's favorite and most comfortable pants were inappropriate attire for softball practice that afternoon. I agreed. After all, they are blue jeans but I decided it was a battle not worth fighting. Unfortunately I had not considered that it

might become one. This caused a stand off from behind a locked door and an escalating argument. At least I wasn't called to referee the stand-off as it was occurring, I thought to myself.

I knew all about it, as I had already heard Erin's version.

"Yes, I know," I answered, reassuring her that I had let Erin know that I didn't think it was a big deal. But remote parenting required me to soothe hurt feelings and help make peace between two stubborn parties, helping each to understand the other's perspective.

We talked awhile and soon everything was back to normal. I knew it was probably the first of many phone calls I would get while I was out of town working.

And that's OK. It's important to be accessible even when I'm away. After all, God is accessible 24/7, so I like to think that I'm also omnipresent and the cell phone makes it possible for me to be involved in the daily issues, questions and concerns even when I am in a remote location.

Now if only I were omniscient too...I might have been able to prevent the locked out stand-off. After all, as moms aren't we expected to have all the answers all the time? I don't know about you but I would rather reserve that role for God.

Prayer: God, sometimes when my kids call me, I don't want to answer my phone. Help me feel differently and help me be in a good mood when I do talk to them. I want them to feel good about our conversations, not like they are bothering me. I also need to remember that what may seem like nothing much to me may be huge to them. Help me understand and look at life through their eyes. Amen

Action Step

If you need to be away from your children, write a detailed plan incorporating your kid's suggestions (this is the step most of us miss) for while you are away. Make sure you leave no stone (assumption) unturned and encourage compromise.

Joy to the World Equals Stress to my Life

May he give you the desire of your heart and make all your plans succeed. Psalm 20:4

One more day and it would be December. It's practically enough to make me break out into a cold sweat. Only 25 days till Christmas.

A list, I thought to myself. "I'd better make a list...and check it at least twice."

Put the tree up, get the decorations out, write Christmas cards, haul out the packed away and forgotten bargain gifts, pull together the donations for the Holiday open house, attend the winter concert, bake cookies...and the list went on and on.

Not to mention gifts.

But wait a minute. Isn't Christmas supposed to be a time of joy? A celebration of Christ? A season of peace? Then why all the stress?

Part of it has to do with a lack of planning and part of it has to do with unrealistic expectations.

Next year I am addressing Christmas cards in July while I am sitting at the pool, I think to myself as my hand is developing a cramp from addressing envelopes to carry our Christmas greeting which long ago ceased being a tribute to the non-existent perfect American family.

We are anything but, and I would feel a little bit better if I were not the only one to admit it...

My thoughts were interrupted by my daughter's request. "Mommy, can we put the tree up?"

My mother answered for me from the kitchen. "No!"

I simultaneously said, "sure" as my mother scowled at me from the kitchen.

"Why not? I think that's a great idea." I survey the family room and shove the chair to the side using my hip to make more room for the tree. "But you'll have to ask your dad to bring it up from the basement."

"Why aren't you putting up a real tree?" my mother asks, lamenting the uncertain future of all the trees that have been chopped but not yet claimed. I could save a tree, but no, I have a fake.

More stress...

"D-A-D-D-Y can you go get the tree?" daughter number one hollered while suddenly experiencing a burst of energy that was absent half an hour earlier when she was supposed to be practicing her piano.

I finished off addressing the last of the envelopes and surveyed the Christmas tree coming to life in the family room. I had lost my bid for white lights. But I decided to keep my mouth shut and be thankful that my daughter and her friend had decided to hone their decorating skills, and an hour later the tree was up! I was charmed by the bright lights and assortment of homemade ornaments spanning several years of elementary school.

"Too bad you don't have a real tree," my mother remarked.

"And where are the beautiful glass ornaments you had last year?"

"And what about white lights? Don't you like the white lights better?"

Bah humbug I thought. But this is NOT what Christmas is meant to be and I chose instead to be grateful rather than Grinch-like.

Yes, I did prefer white lights. Yes, I loved the smell of a natural tree. Yes, there were nice glass ornaments somewhere. But this tree was perfect.

“Look mommy!” my daughter pointed at the tree with excitement. It was beautiful. And in that moment there was joy and there was peace.

The tree was beautiful and captured in a small way the essence of the season. A spontaneous act of celebration, joy and delight, carried out without attention to perfection.

And that was a lesson I needed to learn.

Prayer: God, help me to keep Christ in Christmas. I know it is a cliché but it's true. Help me to stay fully present and not overwhelmed during the Holidays. Help me get rid of unrealistic expectations. Amen

Action Step

There are several ways to prepare for Christmas ahead of time. Make a shopping list ahead of time for gifts for family and friends and wrap and label them as a summer vacation project with your kids. Take Christmas cards along with you when you have some down time also over the summer and address and stamp the envelopes.

Think about what you have tried to accomplish in past years and which activities added more stress, making you think to yourself, "I wish this was over," referring to Christmas and then commit to eliminating those things next year. Do you really have to host a cookie exchange or write a personal Christmas card to every single person at church? With a bit of planning ahead and devoting some time to holiday planning each month of the year, when December rolls around you may re-discover the joy of the season.

Signing Off

All man's efforts are for his mouth, yet his appetite is never satisfied. Ecclesiastes 6:7

It's a fact.

I over commit myself and dive into very deep holes head first without looking. I find out after the fact the holes are deep and require a long, long climb out after I hit bottom and realize I should have followed the advice of the familiar adage, "look before you leap."

I wear way too many hats.

Mom, wife, writer, church volunteer, parent educator, friend... I regularly hear people tell me they get tired just listening to what I am juggling.

But when there are so many roles to juggle how many balls get dropped? I can't think in complete sentences let alone keep track of it all if I am interrupted. But is it fair to bark at my kids because I have overcommitted myself?

But I didn't learn my lesson, recently making a spur-of-the-moment decision to join a medical service team traveling to Honduras. I recalled the trip my family had taken together earlier in the year and made a rash decision to join a team traveling that fall. I convinced everyone around me that I should go, the proof being the availability of a free ticket with frequent flyer miles.

"It's meant to be" I reasoned. There was a ticket available for the specific dates the team was traveling. Never mind that the trip would take me away for a week, including a weekend I had committed to spending with my

husband and daughters. Never mind that I had promised to help a friend with her kids while she was finishing a course that week. Never mind that I had to turn around and work two days after returning.

What was I thinking?

Fortunately it didn't take too long to realize I had made a hasty decision, piling on commitment after commitment at the expense of my family, all in the name of service.

Balance is a word that is often missing from my vocabulary but one that is so important.

The Bible is clear in its directive to take time for rest and refreshment. But why is it so hard for us moms to do?

Instead of signing up, let's learn to sign off and focus on our kids in a positive, nurturing way.

The next time you are tempted to dive into something headfirst make sure you check out how deep the hole is first.

Prayer: God, I'm tired of over committing myself and need your help to stop making this mistake over and over again. Help me learn to say "no" and evaluate and pray about decisions, even the small ones. Help me to lean on you more rather than myself. Amen

Action Step

When someone asks you to do something, get into the habit of deferring the answer. Don't immediately commit, unless it is a total no brainer. Instead, ask for a day or two to think it over. This is especially true if you are tempted to say "yes," but know it is a decision you'll regret. Allow yourself at least a day to consider the pros and cons of making each commitment. If you haven't already done so, develop a filter (your mission statement) to pass your decisions through and then, if necessary, rehearse your answer.

Not Tonight Dear...

People may think all their ways are right, but the LORD weighs the heart. Proverbs 21:2

When our oldest son was born and the obstetrician told me we had to abstain from sex for six weeks, I thought I had misunderstood. Surely he meant six months or maybe six years? I had just achieved the mathematically impossible and pushed a seven pound four ounce baby out through a ten centimeter opening, with a little bit of help from the OB via an episiotomy. I would be sitting sideways for weeks and we were only supposed to abstain from sex for six of them? It was obvious the obstetrician was in my husband's camp.

Besides my bottom being sore (for weeks!), I was also still forty pounds overweight. How can there be anything sexy about resembling a beached whale, leaking from practically every orifice? Throw in some fatigue and post-partum blues and you have a bona fide new mother basket case.

Introduce the flannel nightgown! never mind our son was born the end of April, and winter had blown out. Beached whales don't look sexy no matter what, but flannel nightgowns do provide a bit of extra anti-sexy insurance. In case my husband became amorous before the six week mark, the flannel was intended to send a definite "not tonight dear" message.

So what's my excuse now that our son is turning twenty-seven? I am still tired and still don't feel sexy. I am decidedly middle aged and spend more time than I care, juggling the multiple details of life and nurturing a family and managing a household. Today the duties not specifically mentioned on the wife/mother job description include providing service to our Honda Odyssey that long ago exhausted its 36,000-mile warranty long before the allotted 36 mont. I guess the car is also approaching middle age.

Along with middle age come wrinkles and sags, and an overwhelming desire to sleep and unfortunately sometimes a complacency and laziness about sharing physical intimacy.

Don't get me wrong. I relish the thought of intimacy, all kinds of intimacy with my husband. However, it is absent more often than not in our suburban, chaotic family existence. We don't live on an all inclusive resort, after all. Maybe I can add that to my Christmas list!

God has made us spiritual, emotional and physical beings. He has created ways for us to share intimacy with each other on all levels. I guess I need to ditch the flannel nightgown and communicate my love to my husband through physical intimacy. In the meantime, I yearn for the intimacy of a lazy morning drinking coffee in bed without any interruptions from kids. I think we are still a good six or seven years away from that. Perhaps if we keep the blinds pulled down, maybe the wrinkles and sags won't be so noticeable.

Prayer: God, help me have more energy and desire for my husband. I know it's there somewhere, probably under laundry mountain or the pile of papers I haven't gotten to. Please help me find it and the romance too. It would be great to have those back. Amen

Action Step

Why not swap kids with another stressed out, overwhelmed and tired mom who is also in need of intimacy with her husband? It's hard to find the time to get away and find is the wrong word; the time has to be made. Arrange a romance co-op group. If you can do this kind of thing to clean your house, why not for a romantic evening with your spouse?

Wrapped in Inertia

Lazy hands make a man poor, but diligent hands bring wealth. Proverbs 10:4

I surveyed my “to do” list and thought I might start to hyperventilate. There was so much writing crammed onto the page that the list snaked around the bottom and up the side.

Birthday gift for party at noon on Saturday;

Softball practice (field yet to be determined) at five;

Girl Scout permission slip to be signed for Camporee (despite the fact that we don't own a tent or know how to put one up);

Post office;

Grocery store-(my girls informed me there was “nothing to eat” despite having enough food to feed us all if Armageddon occurred);

Go to the notary and replace the lost car inspection sticker;

Call the glass shop to arrange for windshield replacement due to baseball mishap;

And that was only the top third of the page.

I still had to go through the girls' backpacks and pull out papers that required attention and would, no doubt, add several more items to my “to do” list.

I vowed I would never put more items on my list than there was room for on a page. I had not kept my word since my list spilled over onto the back. Inertia immediately set in. There were so many items, I didn't know where to begin and shoved the "to do" list off to the side. Instead, I busied myself with cleaning the kitchen sink. The list would still be there later.

But the list was whirling in the back of my mind. I schemed and plotted ways to attack the list in the most sensible manner. I wanted to make the most efficient use of time, allowing me to cram more on to my list. Still I couldn't move.

I was getting dizzy just thinking about it and recalled a conversation with a friend.

"I am going to start a procrastinator's anonymous group," she stated matter of factly.

I immediately offered to sign on as a charter member, perhaps even serve as an officer. This would lend some legitimacy to my inertia.

Sometimes I find myself faced with the same dilemmas when it comes to how I serve God. After all, there are so many ways to utilize the gifts and talents God has given us. We can happily go on our way, listing all kinds of wonderful ways to become involved in "Christian Ministry" and have so many acts of kindness on our list that we develop inertia in that department also.

But God doesn't want either extreme in our lives. He doesn't want us to be beholden to lists and He doesn't want us to be card-carrying members of Procrastinator's Anonymous, either.

Instead, He wants us to embrace a balanced life that include acts of service without the crazy lists and times of quiet that provide a time for rest, not procrastination.

Prayer: God, help me make good choices with my time, spending time both working and relaxing. Help me appreciate each moment, not as something to get through, but as a gift of delight. Help get rid of expectations and burdens that prevent this in my life. Amen

Action Step

For the next week, allow yourself five minutes in the morning to be still. This is a discipline and you need to schedule time to make it happen. Set the alarm a few minutes earlier and allow yourself to start your day quietly. If you want, you can pray but the essence of this step is to re-acquaint yourself with what it feels like to be totally quiet and do nothing. You find that starting your day in and with peace helps to bring a calm that many are missing.

I am a Techno-Peasant

I love you, O LORD, my strength. Psalm 18:1

I am a techno-peasant in a techno-geek world. Period. I don't have or want a Blackberry and am still content to think of Blackberries as fruits and not devices that enable one to be plugged in and accessible to almost everyone at all times.

I am barely able to check my voice mail, still don't know how to text, can't operate my nine-year-old daughter's iPod and am glad to know that there are still some people (my husband among them) who don't know what MySpace is.

But at times being a techno-peasant in this 24/7 world poses problems. Like the time my daughter's school tried to reach me and couldn't because I happened to leave my cell phone at home when I went to pick my mother up from the dentist.

In the span of less than fifteen minutes, my daughter had become sick at school and, in this techno geek world of immediate access and immediate response, the expectation was that I would be immediately reachable. When I wasn't, it set off a series of events that rippled to a friend and my husband with expectations that they should also be immediately available to pick up my daughter from school.

Oblivious to the fact that a bulletin for my whereabouts had been issued, I went about my day, picking my mother up from the dentist and dropping her off at her next appointment.

When I returned home (I had been gone less than fifteen minutes) I noticed the red light flashing on my phone, signaling that I had a message.

“Hello, Mrs. Pride, this is Ruth, the school nurse. Your daughter, Nicole has a fever and isn’t feeling well. Please come and pick her up.” What the message didn’t relay was that the nurse had also called my friend and my husband. Just as I was replacing the receiver, my cell phone rang.

“Kathy,” my friend, Linda said in a somewhat breathless voice. “The school called me to tell me Nicole is sick but I can’t get her. I’m at work.”

“No problem, I’m on my way out the door.”

Then the phone rang again. This time it was my mother telling me she was finished with her next appointment and she needed to be picked up.

I grabbed my cell phone before leaving the house and drove to the school. Just as I was pulling in, my husband was also pulling in. I lowered my window, and looked at him with surprise.

“What are you doing here?” I asked, really clueless that he was there for the same reason I was. He was not amused. A dermatologist, he was already behind seeing patients during his morning clinic.

“They,” he said with emphasis, “couldn’t get a hold of you so they called me to pick up Nicole.”

And that was when it hit me that I don’t like technology and the expectation of immediacy that it brings to each interaction. I feel like I am caught in a tennis match of volleys that need to be returned faster and faster. And I don’t like it.

At one time, cell phones were reserved for emergencies. Now it’s assumed that everyone has one and is always available.

I have to admit I am guilty of this expectation even though I don’t like being on the receiving end.

I would love to remain a techno-peasant but I have a feeling I need to become a little more geekish just so I can stay connected when it's really important.

But it reminds me also of how important it is to stay connected to God. And I'm glad that communication still happens in the good old fashioned way.

Prayer: God, help me slow down in this insanely crazy techno powered 24/7 world I live in. Help me focus on one thing at a time and be content with meeting one need at a time in a sane way, which sometimes means without the help of technology. Help me stay true to my priorities and beliefs. Amen

Action Step

Do you need to be as techno connected as you are? It is likely that you travel with several items that all have plug-in chargers. When you travel, pack a power strip to plug all your electronics so they are in one place. You are less likely to lose re-chargers!

Keeping Up with the Jones's

All a man's ways seem right to him, but the LORD weighs the heart. Proverbs 21:2

"We're just like the Babylonians," my friend remarked to me, referring to the Old Testament group who epitomized the "nothing but the best, always more" mindset. "Never enough, more-more-more. The best, the newest, the finest. And," she added, "if we don't have it yet, we want it and won't be satisfied till we get it. But even then, we still won't be satisfied."

I nodded my head in agreement, knowing it was true, as I tried to keep a brisk pace and conversation going simultaneously during one of our recent morning walks.

"I think we're going to build," my friend, who was moving, remarked. "We just can't find anything we really want where we're going." I thought about my own home that we had built. At one point, it had everything I wanted, yet I had become dissatisfied.

She paused and glanced at me. "I'd really like to put in a home theater. Do you think it's too much?"

Without skipping a beat I said, "Yes."

"But I really want one," she laughed, realizing she sounded just like our daughters begging for the latest American Girl doll or newest outfit from Hollister.

She cast her head back and laughed some more. "It's hard not to want when everyone around us has so much." A conversation about pools, finished basements, interior decorators and play sets grander than some communities playgrounds followed.

“Personally, I would add a sun room,” I mused. “I’d rather have a sun room than a home theater.” Yet what I really wanted didn’t exist in my neighborhood: lots of neighborhood kids to serve as ready playmates for my girls. That was why I wanted to move. Not so I could have a home theater but so I could have a neighborhood of kids.

“Some people have both.”

“And some have neither,” I concluded, pondering my next move. “I think next time we move, I’ll downsize.”

“Downsize?” she asked, incredulous.

“Sure...why do I need more room? My boys are grown, the girls are growing fast and I hate cleaning. I have had the big house and it’s not all it’s cracked up to be. More to clean and take care of. I’d rather have kids running around the neighborhood that the girls could play with.”

We rounded the bend and started the homestretch of our walk, a large uphill climb. And as we huffed our way up the hill, I thought about possessions and “keeping up with the Jones’s” and realized that, at least on our walk, we would get to the top of our hill. Unfortunately, the mountain of more-more-more only reaches plateaus but never the summit. As long as we look to material possessions to satisfy us, we remain unsatisfied. The only way to reach the summit is to put our hope in God.

Prayer: God, I need to be more grateful and take much less for granted in my life. I am not good at this. Stop me from envying what others have and please get rid of covetousness when it creeps in. Help me remember that

I don’t need more. Thank you. Amen

Action Step

Our focus determines our mindset. When envy occupies front and center, it crowds out space for gratitude and thanksgiving. Start each day by listing five things you are thankful for in your life. As you continue this habit you find that you envy others less and less.

I Need a Vacation from my Vacation

“Laughter,” I said, “is foolish. And what does pleasure accomplish?” Ecclesiastes 2:2

Vacations are supposed to be restful, relaxing and a break from it all. So why do I feel so stressed out? Because I knew I had to pack and then when we returned, unpack.

Packing always puts me in a bad mood. The vacation already had a black cloud hovering over it and it hadn't even started yet. It seems that everyone else's definition of packing is throwing either too few or too many of their own belongings in a suitcase and announcing thirty seconds later that they are done.

Snacks, sunscreen, batteries, movies, iPods, books, maps, bug spray and the myriad of other things that can make or break a trip, but no one else takes responsibility for, are all on MY list?

“There's got to be a better way,” I muttered to myself, while rummaging through the junk drawer searching for the extra AA batteries that had just been there. “Who took the AA batteries?” I hollered to no one in particular and anyone in general who might answer.

No one was listening.

Next I scoured the shelves of the pantry searching for snacks that I could throw in the back seat of the car. Where were they? I kept looking and realized that yesterday's playmates had chosen to eat them instead of the popsicles which could not survive the car ride. Two for two.

Next on the agenda was packing sunscreen. The spray-on mist was also missing. It appears that it had been taken along on the last class trip and forgotten meaning the only available choice was a lotion which would be met with high levels of resistance. One daughter would protest that she had dark skin and didn't need any. The

other daughter, a redhead, would insist that her sensitive skin could only tolerate the mist. Another black cloud was forming on the horizon.

I was ready to give up. But I still had movies, games, toys and various other items of entertainment to gather. At least I wouldn't have to put the kayak on top of the car. At least I didn't think so.

Yet I persevered, remembering Paul's words of encouragement found in the New Testament: "Let us run the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith." (Hebrews 12:1-2)

Prayer: God, I need to remember that everyone doesn't get a vacation. I forget this. Help me slow down, so my vacation doesn't become just another day full of routines. Help me use vacation time to create happy memories. Help me to appreciate the breaks and not complain about the preparation getting away requires. Amen

Action Step

Make up a vacation master plan checklist. List all the different categories of items you need: snacks, electronic devices, toys, books, personal items, towels, clothes, and any other category you can think of. Also make a master list of things you need to arrange for at home before you leave, such as mail and newspaper collection, pet care, etc. Then assign categories for different family members to be responsible for. Once you have made up the lists, make several copies of them so you won't need to expend the thinking energy each time you go away.

Morning has Broken

In the morning you will say, "If only there were evening!" and in the evening, "If only it were morning!" because of the terror that will fill your hearts and the sights that your eyes will see. Deuteronomy 28:67

I glanced sideways, squinting at the alarm clock: 6:23. I could safely squeeze in seven more minutes of shut eye before I would have to start thinking about getting up in earnest.

But then I heard my older daughter, calling for me like a bleating sheep. "Mom, mom, mom!"

I rolled over and in a voice just loud enough for her to hear but not so loud her sister would, I replied, "Seven more minutes, you and, more importantly, I have seven more minutes." I counted on each of those seven minutes before the day would take off without me.

But soon, those seven minutes were gone and Twist and Shout blared from the clock radio halfway through the chorus. The Beatles pleaded with me, "Come on, come on, come on baby now." I hoped this wasn't a prophetic statement about how my day would start, (with twisting and shouting and pleading with my girls to "come on, come on, come on...") but most mornings were precisely that.

I threw my legs over the side of the bed and padded to my daughter's room to let her know that as soon as I grabbed my first cup of coffee (I now support a pot-a-day habit) I would be back to help her greet her day. In the meantime, she had rolled over and pulled the covers over her head, content to grab a few more zzzzz's.

Once back upstairs, coffee in hand, my day started predictably.

"What's the weather, Mommy?" my older daughter asked. Some mornings I hit weather.com before she had the chance to ask but this morning I was already one step behind.

“Sixties and partly cloudy,” I proclaimed.

“Is that warm or cold?”

“Neither, just in between,” I answered, knowing that this answer created the opening for too many wardrobe possibilities. Heaven forbid we actually choose clothing the night before.

In the meantime, I held my breath and prayed that her younger sister, decidedly NOT a morning person and completely unpredictable, would stay asleep until after I dropped her older sister off at the bus stop.

One off, one to go. I happily drive my younger daughter to school in the morning to give her more time (which is still never enough) to get ready in the morning.

I, however, share most of the blame for the fact that, most mornings, we border on being tardy. You see, the alarm is not set early enough to accommodate her snail’s pace of getting ready for the day. And I don’t readjust because, frankly, it is so quiet while she is still asleep.

When there is still no sign of life from Nicole, I guardedly approach her bed and start to gently rub her back.

“Nicole, Nicole,” I call, like a mourning dove, “it’s time to wake up.”

This morning she responds with a grunt and crawling further beneath her covers.

Not to be deterred, I continue rubbing. Finally she stretches and grunts some more, her curly red hair sticking out in all directions. I know as soon as she sees her reflection, she will want to take a shower to tame her unruly mane. This will add at least eight minutes to our routine, prompting several agitated “hurry ups” from me.

The rest of our routine is also fairly predictable. Indecision about what to wear, underwear with holes and socks that don’t feel right the first five times I help her put them on. The water bottle needs to be filled with fresh

water. Then I realize I have not written the obligatory note stating that she will not be riding the bus that afternoon but instead will be pick up. 7:58 and ticking.

We make it out of the house and I realize my car keys are not where I thought they were. I make a mad dash back inside the house, grab the keys and wisely decide against answering the phone which is now ringing.

“Am I late? Am I late? Nicole persistently repeats. “Not yet,” I answer but this reply offers no satisfaction. Apparently this is a multiple choice question with only two acceptable answers, “yes” or “no” even though neither option is correct.

We argue about semantics all the way down the hill to the school, where she arrives just in the nick of time.

All the same, morning has broken and it is the dawning of a new day. And, for the moment, I rejoice in it, simply because it is once again quiet.

Prayer: God, I am not a morning person so thank you for coffee! Help me be more organized in the morning so I don't start my day with yelling. I don't want my day to be a series of to-do's to get through but time spent well.

Thanks. Amen

Action Step

Preparation is the key to smooth mornings. Make a check list of everything that needs to be done to get ready for school and give as many age appropriate choices as possible to your kids. Also try to do as much as you can the night before, even though you will probably be tempted to let things go till morning. Make sure backpacks, lunches and clothes are out and ready to go and give yourself a few extra minutes in the morning to get a jump start on your kids.

Extreme Home Makeovers

God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble. Psalm 46:1

I've been the recipient of an extreme home makeover, just not the one most of us dream about.

I am type A. I believe everything belongs in its place and decidedly was born with the compulsive picker upper gene. Unfortunately I am alone in carrying this genetic trait. It obviously is recessive on my husband's side of the family and has yet to surface in any of our children.

I am amazed at the amount of cyclonic damage that can occur in my house within hours.

Today I have been gone less than 24 hours...but it looks like a category five storm has swept through my house. I'm not in the mood for this after midnight but my inner cleaning freak takes over.

First, I survey the surface of what I assume is the kitchen table which is totally covered with papers. It is hard to tell which are old papers and which are tomorrow's homework but I manage to sort it out and in the process find three different permission slips, all ignored until now, but due tomorrow.

Then I notice a hodgepodge of mail and newspapers, most of which could have gone directly into recycling but needed my personal stamp of approval to be discarded.

The voicemail light on the phone is blinking, begging for needed responses. I start to feel my blood pressure rise and wonder why the genetic predisposition to clutter seems to go with a predisposition to not answering the phone. My mind wandered to a time I needed to reach my husband. I knew he was home yet he wouldn't answer the phone and I had to call my next door neighbor and have her make a house call.

I glanced at the kitchen sink stacked with dirty dishes, including a puddle of fruit smoothie stuck to the kitchen counter underneath the blender. I momentarily thought about loading the dishwasher, but it was half full of clean dishes and that would have added an extra step. I noted my family's wisdom in running the dishwasher. "Hey, mom, we did the dishes." And I couldn't argue with that. Technically, they were correct. Except the dishwasher was only half full and would need to be unloaded before the sink full of dirty dishes could be loaded.

Next, I followed a trail of dirty laundry and wardrobe changes through the family room and up the stairs, culminating at the bathroom sink where caked up toothpaste was evidence that the girls had brushed their teeth.

I tripped over the dog but at least he was still alive.

I made my way to the bathroom. Telltale signs of bathtime surrounded me: more discarded dirty clothes, wet towels (doubling as bath mats) and an un-drained tub all vied for my attention.

Where was my extreme home makeover? Pristine counters, neatly folded laundry, packed backpacks, school clothes laid out, lunches packed and permission slips signed and neatly tucked in homework binders?

And inside my head a dialog raged: anger vs. forgiveness and acceptance.

"Why can't I even be away one day and come home to a neat house?" the voice of anger screamed. "I work hard, I deserve to come home to a neat house. After all, when I'm home I juggle carting and fetching, signing off on homework, getting the dishes done and making sure the favorite pants are clean to wear, not to mention baking homemade cookies for the snack at Girl Scouts."

"God didn't create you and your husband identically," answers the voice of acceptance. "Be thankful that you have talent that allows you to work and a husband who attends to (dotes on) the girls while you are at work."

I often forget the latter and am too quick to remember the former. But God gently reminds me that forgiveness always trumps anger and bitterness.

Prayer: God, help me remember that not everyone has the same definition of "cleaned up" as I do. Thank you that I have a roof over my head and help me realize it doesn't always have to look perfect, although not totally chaotic would be nice. Help me be less type A about this. For me, that is HARD. Amen

Action Step

If you are going to be out of town, invite your family to eat off of paper plates, or better yet, eat out. See if you can arrange to have someone come in and de-clutter or pick up for you if you know this is going to be a problem. Is there someone you can swap time with who can help you out? Identifying stressors and solutions ahead of time makes the transition from away to home easier.

The Saturday Box

A time to search and a time to give up, a time to keep and a time to throw away.

Ecclesiastes 3:6

I had reached the outer limit of my tolerance threshold.

Belongings were strewn all over the house: a trail of clothing, Bratz dolls and Littlest Pet Shop Animals. Notebooks, pencils, Nintendo DS games and baby dolls that had relocated from the playroom up to the dining room which now resembled an orphanage. Strollers, cribs and babies were everywhere.

“Don’t worry, Mom, we’ll clean-up,” I was reassured when I agreed to a playdate. “We’ll put it away,” the promise continues and the playdate commitment is sealed. I am assured that everything will be returned to its proper place but the house is such a mess I don’t think anyone remembers what or where the proper place is.

Not much later, my threshold was exceeded and I announced the arrival of “the Saturday Box.” It’s a large container where everything not put back where it belongs is held hostage until at least the following Saturday, maybe longer.

“Nooooo, not my babies, who will take care of them,” wailed my younger daughter.

“My notebooks? No, not my notebooks,” my older daughter’s voice quivered.

I have had it and stood there smugly announcing that a bulldozer may as well come through and plop it all in the garage which would become a great big Saturday Box if things weren’t put back where they belong.

Instead of motivating action, I motivated a meltdown.

Yes, they needed to put their things away but grace and graciousness and consistent enforcement were absent from my tirade. Did I really expect compliance? As I thought about this, I thought how unhappy God must be with me at times for my lack of follow through or not putting things in order in my life. I needed my own Saturday box for the out of place things in my life.

But the approach to both includes one filled with grace, taken one step at a time with encouragement for each success.

“OK,” I suggested, “let’s start over, together,” I suggested.

We moved the babies back downstairs and lined their cribs up in a row and tucked them in with their binkies. We picked up the notebooks, pencils and other art supplies and took them back upstairs. God reminded me that boundaries and responsibility are necessary but so are grace and consistent modeling.

Prayer: God, I need help balancing encouragement and nagging when it comes to people picking up after themselves. Help me remember that the more stuff we get, the more stuff there is to take care of and put away.

Help us all be disciplined when it comes to getting more and taking care of our stuff. Amen

Action Step

Buy two bins for each family member. Each family member will have their own Saturday Box in addition to a small bin used to collect items to be put away. Have a family meeting to review rules and expectations and soon you will be living in a cleaner house!

A White Tile Floor...What was I Thinking...

What does the worker gain from his toil? Ecclesiastes 3:9

“Mom,” my daughter said in exasperation, “you promised you weren’t going to complain about the floor anymore.” And, in a matter-of-fact tone of voice, she added,

“You lied.”

My response was to squirm, immediately indicating I knew she was right but was going to try to figure out a way to deny her accusation.

“No, no, I didn’t lie,” I stammered, unconvinced by my own words.

“Yes, you lied,” she continued, fueled by my hesitation.

“Well, maybe,” I conceded, “But I didn’t mean to,” I finished with a weak smile.

But it was true. I did say I wouldn’t complain about my white tile floor ever again. How quickly I forgot.

But I needed to remember why I had made this vow.

Several months earlier, our family had traveled to Honduras as part of a service team. Instead of working with the medical team, I decided to help put cement floors in homes that only had dirt floors; dirt floors that became mudslides in the middle of the home during the rainy season which lasted several weeks.

There were no cement mixers or running water; only shovels, river sand and water hauled by hand from a nearby stream.

Yet the families were so grateful, the look of appreciation very clearly communicated through their eyes despite a language barrier. The language of love is universal.

As I mixed the cement powder with the river sand and water, occasionally removing a rock too large to be mixed in, I thought about my floor at home. I thought about my house at home and how much I have and how much I often take for granted.

My kitchen is larger than their entire home. I have a floor that doesn't turn into a mudslide. I have access to running water. And so much more.

As we sat after dinner on the patio of the Mission house that evening, sharing our experiences from the day, I said with great conviction, "I will never, ever complain about my white tile floor again."

But my commitment faded and I complained about the sticky spots on the floor where the popsicle had melted, dog hair collected in the corner, caked up dirt all over the laundry room from softball cleats which had not been taken off in the garage.

"You're right," I finally said, "I did say I wouldn't complain and I am. I need to be thankful instead."

"Will you help me out?" I asked my daughter. "Will you remind me or stop me if I forget again?"

Of course she was more than happy to oblige. "How about now, Mom?" she asked with a twinkle in her eye.

"Forget the floor and come out and play."

And I did.

Prayer: God, I need to remember that there are tons of people in the world who don't have a roof over their head or a floor under their feet. Help me do a better job of remembering and if that means my daughter reminding me, or even calling me a liar, so be it. Amen

Action Step

No one likes to listen to a complainer. It is much more pleasant to be surrounded by positive people. Why not start a “no more complaining” fund? Every time someone complains, a quarter needs to be added to a jar set aside for this purpose. When the jar is full, donate the money to a person or cause that can benefit.

Frumpy, Flabby or Fabulous?

Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit lives in you?

1 Corinthians 3:16

“God loves me no matter what I look like.”

“It's what's on the inside that counts.”

I repeated these words, words that feel like excuses, to myself as I stepped on the scale and saw that today was decidedly a flabby day. Of course that made me feel frumpy and fabulous went out the window months ago.

Even worse was the discovery that the pants I wanted to wear wouldn't quite button. When did that happen? They fit just a little while ago.

Yet fabulous was right at my fingertips so why couldn't I just grab it? Because I had bought into pop culture's message (lie) that at pushing 50 I could still look like I did at 22. Well, there are women who are 50 who look 22, I've seen them on Oprah. I, however, am not one of them.

Despite feeling frumpy and flabby, I decided to go for fabulous and rummaged through my closet for something without a waist band. I grabbed a black dress with faint white vines and nodded in silent approval. Then I picked a bright cranberry jacket and accent it with a red beaded necklace. Things were looking up. I completed the ensemble with wild earrings, black shoes and just a hint of lipstick to accentuate the smile that had now formed on my lips.

Fabulous is more of a state of mind and, when I embrace and accept who God has made me to be, I move from frumpy to fabulous. I may still be flabby, after all, I have had four children! But I will be confident in those

things I know to be true: that God does love me the way I am, wrinkles, bulges and all, and that, with a little help from strategic wardrobe choices and the right color lipstick, I can create a physical illusion and disguise the rolls and wrinkles.

But it is an ongoing struggle and one I don't win every day. Many days I want to kick the scale (and myself) in disgust for lack of discipline: too much eating, too little exercising and grab another Hershey Kiss instead of making a good food choice.

I need to remember that each day I am given the gift of a new beginning and I have a choice about my attitude. It can be one which is frumpy or fabulous and really has very little to do with how much flab is around my mid-section. I will make a conscious effort to see myself through God's eyes, as one of His fabulous children.

Prayer: God, yes, I wish I still had my twenty-year-old body but I don't and I need to accept that. So instead of wishing for what I don't have, help me accept what I do have: food for meals, (sometimes too much) and help me make good, healthy food choices. Amen

Action Step

There are several healthful habits that can be incorporated as lifestyle changes that can help you look and feel better. Start by adding one at a time and stick with it for one to two weeks before going on to the next one.

Drink six to eight glasses of water each day.

Exercise 20-30 minutes each day. If 20 minutes is too much to work in, start with fifteen.

Try not to eat at least two hours before going to bed.

Keep chips and fried foods out of the house.

Make fruits and vegetables available as snack options.

Switch the milk you consume to the next less fat option. If you drink whole milk, switch to 2%; switch from 2% to 1%, etc.

Small changes add up to big differences.

We're going to Get in an Accident

And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. Romans 8:28

"Wait," I pleaded, desperation creeping into my voice.

My girls were having their seventeenth cat fight seated right behind me, arguing over something which seemed insignificant to me, yet monumental to them. I was driving in unfamiliar territory to meet my mother at a pre-designated train station on our way to Hartford, CT and could hardly see as rain pelted my windshield and the wipers couldn't keep up. Not to mention I was late.

A French fry hit the dash, thrown with the precision of an airborne missile.

"Quit wasting my food," screeched my older daughter.

"You're not my boss," retorted her younger sister.

"Give me my fries back," sister number one hissed, lunging for the bag of fries which had been snatched and were held just out of reach.

"Un-Uhh," sneered her younger sister.

"Stop, stop!" I screamed, joining in the cat fight which was rapidly escalating.

"We're going to get in an accident!" I shrieked.

More French fries hit the dash.

I followed the signs to the train station and, even though I was over an hour after our appointed meeting time, my mother was nowhere to be seen. She doesn't carry a cell phone so I had no way of getting in touch with her. The girls continued to fight while I got out of the car and looked at the train schedule only to realize there were now two Brewster train stations and I was at the wrong one.

I got back in the car and gripped the steering wheel so tightly my knuckles were white. I had no idea which way to go and every time I entered an intersection I only had a 50-50 chance of getting it right.

“Stupid head!” ugly words continued to volley back and forth behind me.

I continued to grip the steering wheel for dear life and realized I was in a left turn only lane about to get back on the interstate, definitely not the way to the train station. I quickly glanced in the mirror to make sure there wasn't anyone in the right lane and pulled over as the traffic in front of me began to move.

Then I heard the scrape of metal against metal and realized that I had sideswiped a car that was in my blind spot.

It immediately became quiet in the backseat as I pulled off to the side of the road and got out of the car to talk to the driver of the other car. And I was in my pajamas.

My earlier words, “We're going to get into an accident” were prophetic.

But it could have been worse. No one was hurt, the damage to the cars was minimal and I even got directions to the train station. And it prompted peace in the car.

We don't usually believe something bad will happen; I didn't really think I would get into an accident and neither did my girls. But it became a teachable moment. We were able to slow down, take a deep breath and realize it could have been a lot worse. It was a perfect example of making lemonade out of lemons.

Prayer: God, I know if you are there 24/7 that also means You're there when I am traveling. Thanks for Your protection, especially when the kids are screaming and it's hard to concentrate. I also need to remember that however bad it is, it can always be worse. Help me recognize the lessons that I can learn from these situations.

Amen

Action Step

Each time you are confronted with a negative situation or experience, try to list three possible silver lining outcomes. It's always possible to discover some good even in difficult situations or a lesson that can be applied to our life.

Ma-Uh-h-h-m

Teach me your way, O LORD, and I will walk in your truth; give me an undivided heart.

Psalm 86:11

Every mother knows the language of extra syllables.

The extra syllables added for emphasis to draw out a word when a desperate and manipulative child can taste victory in their latest request.

It doesn't really matter what the request is. It can be candy at the grocery checkout, an afternoon play date or a new pair of shoes. The minute an ounce of hesitation or distraction works its way into maternal response, the extra syllabic words are pulled out of the request arsenal.

Mom becomes Ma-uh-h-h-hm and Please becomes Pu-uh-uh-leeeeeze.

But there are other weapons in the arsenal of attack against maternal resolve, including facial expressions, posture and hand motions.

Take the protruding lower lip, for example. Puh-uh-uh-leeze and Ma-uh-uh-uhm are much more effective when accentuated with a protruding lower lip, batting eyelashes and puppy dog eyes. A tilted head and hands clasped together also add extra effect.

So what's a mom to do? Speak their language and try to get to "yes."

After all, don't we have our own version of the same when we pray? We may not verbally say Puh-uh-uh-leeze but isn't that really what we mean most of the time when we really want something from God? And how often do I whine?

So I take a minute and try to start the conversation over without the extra syllables and facial expressions, both with God and my girls.

Prayer: God, thanks for always understanding my language, extra syllables, missing syllables or just plain groans. Help me be patient with my kids and myself but especially help me be fair. Amen

Action Step

Set your kids up for success by getting to “yes” as often as possible. One great strategy is to try to offer kids choices so that instead of saying “no” you are giving the control to them to make a choice of an option that is OK with you. Reinforce great behavior with rewards and lots of praise.

When the Day Planner isn't Big Enough

There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under heaven. Ecclesiastes 3:1

I opened my day-planner to May, shook my head in despair and groaned. I quickly snapped it shut, somehow thinking that if I closed the page, it would magically erase all the dates, commitments and obligations.

I cautiously opened the page again, hoping it would be blank but it was not to be.

The color-coded times leaped off the page at me pulling me in to the chaos of the month. My older son, Chris and younger son, Matt were talented athletes and played both soccer and baseball. Red for Matt's soccer; green for Chris' soccer; blue for Matt's baseball; pink for Chris' baseball. And purple for my appointments and orange for my husband's. The only problem was when Matt had baseball and soccer overlapping the red and blue created purple which further confused matters.

The rainbow of obligations spread across the page but there was no pot of gold to be found, only the "reward" of running from one place to the next, eating at concession stands with their younger sisters in tow.

But back to the day planner. There were more games, practices, doctor's appointments and various and sundry other obligations to record but no more space (or colors). My life required more than a one-inch square block to squeeze it all in.

I focused my attention on the afternoon ahead. Both boys had baseball games at the same time; that was the good news. The bad news was they weren't on the same team anymore but at least they were in the same complex. That was after separate soccer practices on two different fields and tiny tot tumbling for the boys' younger sisters (which required yet an additional color).

Where was the white space? How did all these activities get scheduled? What was going to happen when the boys inevitably were chosen to play on the all-star teams and two more slots needed to be scheduled into non-existent space?

Help, I need help! Any of the following would do nicely: 87 hours in a day, a double or a maxi day planner!

Or did I just need to exercise some boundaries limiting how many activities my kids participated in? How long would the boys be able to play both soccer and baseball and was a tiny tot tumbling class really necessary?

My friends told me what we were doing was normal, everyone was doing it but my heart told me it was wrong.

I was getting hoarse repeating the mantra of “hurry up, we’re going to be late,” and stressing everyone out.

God wants us to use our time wisely, being a prudent steward of that time and, above all, values relationships.

Was scheduling everyone so tightly that meals needed to be consumed on the run, conversations held via cell phone and conversations with my husband occurring via email what God wanted for my family?

Just because “everyone” was doing it didn’t mean it was what God had in mind.

Remember, God doesn’t just want us to do a good job, He wants us to do our best job and sometimes, even though we think creating a rainbow is best, the white space is better

Prayer: God, I need to remember that average or good enough isn’t good enough. It takes so little to be above average. Help me aim for excellent and not be swayed by what “everyone” (whoever that is) else is doing.

Thank you. Amen

Action Step

Make a list of each of the activities your kids are in. Make one page per child. List all the times of practices, classes and games. In addition, make a master grid to visualize the flow of the week.

Ask yourself the following questions:

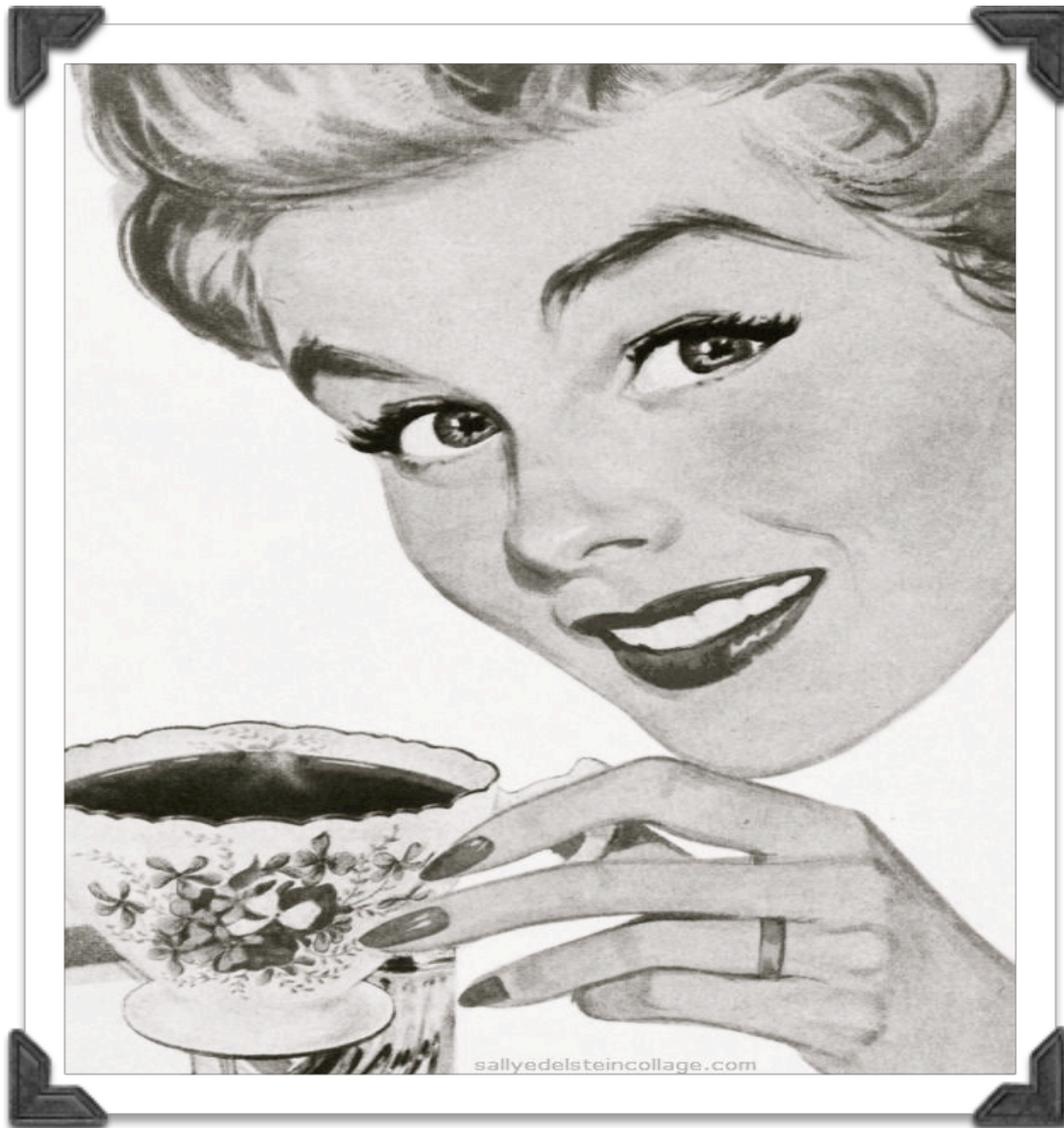
What is the latest time you ideally want your kids involved in after school activities during the week?

Are the activities your kids are in activities they want to do, and if not, then why are they in them?

Does your child have enough down time?

Does your child have time for homework?

Do you have yourself scheduled to be more than one place at a time? And if so, have you arranged for plan B or a double?



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