



February 2011 Issue: Relationships

A Word from the Editor

Beloved!

My husband and I were on his boat, gliding through lonely water that surrounded remote islands. I saw a few broken down shacks that seemed odd in the desolate scenery. My husband explained that they were camping units used for people who were doing overnight fishing. They weren't there to be lived in; They were only necessary for temporary shelter during the dark nights.

I imagined being stuck in one of the houses, unable to communicate with anyone for my entire life. Being an introvert, this didn't sound too bad at first, but I began to feel an intense loneliness and a desperate need to talk to someone--anyone! At that moment, I realized that I would be happy with any purpose God gave me, just as long as I could be around people. Then, I felt an extreme gratitude for the family and friends God has so graciously blessed me with. Humans were created by God to have relationships and to connect with other lives.

Jesus gave us God's two most important commandments: Love God and love each other (Luke 10.27). Relationships are vital to our existence on

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In This Issue

A Word from the Editor

5 SECRETS to Transform Your Marriage

Reaching

What's a BFF

A Better Definition of Love

Personalities and the Fireworks of Love

Five-Paragraph Christianity

Learning to Look Beyond our Expectation

Two Can Play This Game

Author Interview: Alex Marestaing

Not Exactly a Fairy Tale

When You Want To Run Away

Relationships Idols

Lessons from My Children: Doing
Something Great

For the Love of a Son

Issue Poem: Dancing with My Daddy

Quick Links

earth and in heaven, yet we are so quick to take them for granted. We value knowledge and learning, but setting aside time to understand the precious relationships around us seems to take a backseat. However, according to Jesus, everything in this world should come second to our relationship with Him and with others.

The articles in this issue are written by women who are putting forth the time and energy to understand, engage and find victory in their relationships. The topics range from our relationship with God, our spouses, our families, our friends and our church; and they each offer godly insights on how to better give in those areas. We hope you enjoy these letters of love, and we pray that you find support and encouragement in every honest offering.

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5 SECRETS to Transform Your Marriage



Has this Valentine's Day revealed that your once blissful marriage looks more like a deficient bank statement than love overflowing? If so, it's not too late. I bring authentic hope! It's time to invest back into your marriage with these proven secrets, especially in the midst of feeling unloved! I learned and lived these five secrets and my marriage went from broken to overflowing:

1. Humbly learn and meet your man's needs.
2. Engage in behavior that attracts him, not repels him.
3. Give him regular undivided attention.
4. Date your mate.
5. Trust God.

Like most couples I spent the majority of our dating season luring and attracting my man. I spent our time together doing things that would cause him to like me, while refraining from doing what would turn him off. Pretty simple, huh? But after tying-the-knot, somewhere along the way, I must have unknowingly taken my husband for granted. I dropped my guard in the comfort of a "happy marriage" and forgot to go out of my way to meet his needs. Then, about ten years ago my husband came home from work one day and blatantly told me that he no longer loved me. His love had grown cold; he no longer wanted to stay married. As you can imagine, I was devastated.

"How can this be?" I thought. From my vantage point, we had a good -- no great marriage! We made love, I kept the house cleaned, I was a good person, I tried my best. Hello? What was missing? Yet, here I was in the same crossroads half American marriages face. My marriage seemed doomed to failure.

While I preferred to run to my parents, a friend convinced me to stay at home and work things out. During this horrible, dark time I read tons of books, got counseling for us both, and spent the next several months examining how things had unraveled. God has since used our struggle many times to encourage other couples to never give up. I hope it does for you too.

Along with our marriage counseling, two authors especially made an impact on our relationship: Dave Ramsey and Dr. Willard Harley. Together their advice opened our eyes. We learned to identify and meet each other's needs. We learned what touches each other's heart for both good and for evil (knowing both are equally important as they both contribute to "the bottom line" balance sheet of love). And we learned to consistently make an effort to build up lasting deposits of love to carry us through when the rough times come.

Financial guru, Dave Ramsey, encourages his clients to keep an accessible three to six months living expenses securely in their savings account that they can tap into should the unexpected happen. This cushion keeps a crisis from destroying you financially -- be it a layoff, death of a family member, or sudden illness. This is such wisdom since the unexpected does happen, yet

most Americans live like they are impervious to disaster, death and disease. In the same way, like I once did, most married folks naively live as if they will never get a divorce, despite statistics. It's the daily deposits of love that add up over time to build you a reserve of love to carry you through the rough seasons.

In his NY Times bestseller *His Needs, Her Needs*, marriage expert Dr. Willard F. Harley shares his twelve ways to place deposits into your spouse's heart. The theory is we all have an "account" that adds and subtracts love from our mate. Harley places the most value on actions or habits that make your spouse feel most loved, such as intimate conversation, quality time, affection, sexual fulfillment, acts of service, verbal affirmation, attractiveness of spouse, recreational companionship (mutual activity, such as fitness or shopping), financial support, domestic support, and more.

According to Harley, a common mistake in the world of "deposits" that we all too often make in showing love to our spouse "is to love your spouse the way you want to be loved rather than the way your spouse prefers to be shown love." For example, if sexual fulfillment is your husband's highest priority and acts of kindness and affection are your highest priorities, well, you've got a problem. You can clean the house to immaculate perfection, hug and kiss him into the next lifetime, and attempt plenty of intimate conversation, yet he still doesn't feel like you love him. Or, if fitness and appearance is important to your man, and you've slacked on taking care of yourself, you'll soon find mounting withdrawals from his love account.

To keep this from happening and to keep your love account building rather than withdrawing, Harley's other book, *Love Busters*, shares many mistakes couples need to cease doing to keep their "love deposits" from evaporating before their very eyes. Here are five common ones:

5 Love Busters

- Selfish demands
- Blatant disrespect
- Angry outbursts
- Dishonesty
- Annoying habits

So, even though you assume you've got a great marriage, have you gotten preoccupied and failed to balance your love account? Over time, have you let a few of these "don'ts" creep into your relationship or has "life happened" and you stopped making an effort to daily deposit love into your husband's heart? If you want to bring your marriage back above the "red line" of deficit to overflowing, then avoid the don'ts and consistently DO these 5 things:

1. **Humbly learn and meets your man's needs:** Whatever needs matter most to your spouse -- make them your priority. Ask him to rank his needs from greatest to least.
2. **Engage in behavior that attracts him, not repels him:** We all know what bugs our spouse, but do we focus on what they love? To continue on in that behavior is selfishness. Make the choice to refrain.

3. **Give him regular undivided attention:** Start small, perhaps 15 minutes a day -- no kids, no cell phones, no TV -- just the two of you connecting face to face.
4. **Date your mate:** You fell in love while dating, so stay in love dating each other forever -- once a week is ideal, but start with once a month if you must.
5. **Trust God:** He sees you and truly cares for you! "My God will meet all your needs according to the riches of his glory in Christ Jesus." - Philippians 4:19

For your marriage to last someone has to make the first move. Like Christ, be the one to humble yourself and choose love, even in the midst of rejection. Is it easy? No. Does it require tenacity beyond what you can give? At times. But if you are a believer in Jesus Christ, you are plugged in to the ultimate Energy Source -- our Heavenly Creator, God. He knows your spouse's ins & outs. As Psalm 139 reveals, God knows you -- before a word is on your tongue, he knows it full well. Every day you will live is written in His book. He knows you and wants to revitalize your marriage! Trust him.

May this Valentine's Day be a fresh start in your marriage! If you follow these secrets, like my marriage, over time you will realize your relationship has gone from broke to overflowing, from "Almost Not" to "Super Hot."

~Jennifer E Smith

As a teen, Jennifer appeared on the cover of *Time Magazine* while demonstrating her faith with *See You at the Pole*. This inspiring leader is the adoring mother of two and has a passion for impacting the lives of the forgotten. With degrees in business and Christian ministries, Jennifer has traveled the globe to almost 30 countries, sharing Jesus and breathing hope into the lives of the poorest of the poor in places such as Tibet, the Americas, Europe, and Asia. She co-created "[If You Only Knew...](#)" an organization focused on providing access to clean water to the Southern African nation of Zambia. Her many life adventures include riding her Harley cross-country, surviving her home exploding from a lightning strike, and birthing her second child on the side of the freeway.

[Home](#)



Reaching



It's been ten years since Trevor and I said, "We do." I'm so grateful that we did, and that we still "do."

For some couples ten years is but a drop in the marital bucket. Others can't see past the wedding plans looming ahead. I can barely grasp that length of time in relation to being married. They have been good years, hard years, frustrating years, and joyful years. Mostly importantly, they've been loyal years.

Trevor is vastly different from me. He's quiet, introspective, thoughtful, and always careful. I don't know a stranger. I'm loud, rarely careful, and overly sensitive. He is intensely private and I think privacy is for the birds. He keeps me in line and I keep him moving. He measures; I guess. He is the reliable, handy navigator and I'm the chatty, friendly tour guide. Yet despite our many differences, Trevor is the safest harbor for my sensitive soul on this side of Heaven. It is as God wisely intended. *"And the Lord God said, 'It is not good that man should be alone; I will make him a helper comparable to him'"* (Genesis 2:18 NKJV).

Our marriage is far from perfect. My noise and emotion can overwhelm while his silence and indifference can confuse. And that's why the power source of our marriage must be our Savior. God intended for us to be married, but with Jesus at the center of our hearts and our lives.

Many years ago God gave me a beautiful picture of marriage. His perfect version of marriage, not the Godless, under-valued, self-based version many recognize today. Trevor and I weren't married yet. My mind couldn't fathom the life-long fullness of marriage and the unyielding responsibility of the vows we would speak. But I've come to cherish this beautiful picture of marriage - marriage as God intended.

Picture a garden full with spring and brimming with the promise of summer. A stone border surrounds the garden, still bare but longing for green cover. It's late April, nearly May. Rain and storms come and go and green is bursting onto the scene. Tiny spots of color are appearing and the vague scent of flowers is warming up the memory and washing away winter's chill. Inside the border of large stones are various mounds of freshly dug soil. The smell of dirt is startling and somehow intoxicating. A wide variety of seeds was recently planted and rest comfortably in their new dirt home, hidden but ready for bursting.

The focal point of the small garden is two trellises standing against one side of an old, worn shed. The shed defines the garden on one of its three sides. The crooked door is often open and the walls are weather-beaten, the paint fading and peeling. Its color is indistinguishable. A single window pane is splintered, veins of glass barely holding their place in the frame. A large brown spider, energized by summer's imminent arrival, tends to her new web under a small eave on the roof.

The wise gardener searched all winter to find the perfect vines to plant in front of the two bare

trellises. On the right he plants a dark green, sturdy vine that by summer's bright beginning will bloom with a few large purple flowers. These elusive flowers will open only to dawn's first light and be closed by noon's glare.

The trellis on the left will eventually be covered with a light green, fast-spreading vine with small leaves whose roots need daily water. The tiny yellow flowers on this vine bloom all day and will be innumerable. They're petite and delicate and a favorite of butterflies and bees alike.

The gardener has taken all this into account and chose the dark-leaved, purple-flowered plant carefully, for it needs little water and will not be affected by the yellow-flowered vine's desperate need for extra moisture. In turn, the many small yellow flowers will one day serve as cover for the light-sensitive petals of the purple-flowered vine.

They are a good match and the gardener plants them with great care and anticipation. He waits until the season is right, the warm weather has arrived and the soil is fertile. Yet immediately upon planting the tiny vines look and act differently. The dark-leaved, purple-flowered plant is a slow grower, spreading out along the bottom of the trellis. Its instinct is sturdy roots and a thick base and it shies away from bright sunlight. It has yet to flower.

The light-colored, tiny-leaved vine grows quickly, efficiently, drinking in the daily moisture and growing only up. The sides of its trellis remain bare as it grows straight up the middle. Its growth is so fast that soon it's nearly a foot higher than the dark-leaved vine. Delicate yellow flowers bloom three days after planting. But the dark-leaved vine is filling in slowly and surely and has begun to spread across. Its thick, sturdy branches are reaching up to the sun but also toward the other trellis, and the two vastly different vines begin to come together.

One month after they're planted a large purple flower finally blooms in the early morning, nudging up against the copious butter-yellow flowers of its neighbor. At the same time the thinner, more delicate branches of the small-leaved vine are beginning to rest on the stronger, sturdier vines of its neighbor.

The gardener works diligently throughout the summer, trimming and pruning as needed. A bare, stray branch is cut here and a dying vine is trimmed there. Useless branches are snipped off in order to increase and guide the vines' growth, direction, and beauty. During the diligent pruning process the light green and dark green leaves have entwined, filling in and reaching upward while winding around each other. Individual flower's branches are indistinguishable as the two vines blossom simultaneously in summer's bright light.

Slowly, the trellises holding the two vines begin to disappear. The dark-leaved vine has grown around both trellises, acting as an anchor and supporting the weaker light-leaved vine's branches. The light-leaved vine is constantly reaching upward, in turn bringing along its neighbor and spreading upward toward the sunlight. There are dozens of small yellow flowers to each large purple flower and the colors mixed together are shockingly vibrant. The flowers open upward, aimed at the life-giving sunlight. When it rains, the dark-leaved plant is slow to absorb the water, allowing the light-leaved vine all the moisture it needs to survive, grow and

flourish.

Together the two vines have survived the summer heat, the raging storms and the occasional, necessary trimming by the gardener. The vines are completely entwined, their branches mingled securely and the flowers layered sweetly like butterfly stairs. What was once separate and entirely different has become a new, unique creation. *"Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and they shall become one flesh"* (Genesis 2:24 NKJV).

In the ten years of our marriage Trevor and I have learned that we must grow together toward the Son, otherwise our growth will be uncontrolled and random. Without Jesus guiding us, our branches might reach toward a hidden shadow rather than Life-giving Light. When our eyes are on the Light coming from above and we're pruned regularly by the Master Gardener, then our coupled vines will continue to reach heavenward - together - toward the Son.

~Kerry Johnson

Kerry Johnson grew up exploring the woods in Connecticut and reading any book she could get her hands on, sometimes at the same time. Now transplanted to sunny Florida, she still loves to read and write, which come third only to her love for her Savior and to her loud and very ticklish family. Her patient hubby Trevor keeps her feet on earth and their two bouncing big boys, Cole and Chase, give the best hugs ever. She finally worked up her courage to join the blogosphere, [A Lamp, a Light, and a Writer](#), where she enjoys writing about God's work and His Word in and throughout her life.



[Home](#)

What's a BFF?



The other day, I read something in one of my devotionals that made me stop and think. That's what a good devotional is supposed to do, right? I won't tell you what it was just yet.

I am mainly writing this as a reminder for myself. However, you are certainly welcome to hop in my little red wagon and come along for the ride with me! (Pay attention: I'll have a question for you at the end!)

Because of what I read, I asked myself....

What is a BFF?

Because of today's method of rapid communication, text messages have taken over and now have their own set of abbreviations. BFF means best friend forever.

Therefore, I asked myself...

If I have a BFF, do I always expect that friend to be doing things for me?

...or...

Do I take time to do things for this friend? How do I treat this BFF?

Here's a list of things that I asked myself. It is, by no means, complete.

Do I...

- *keep in touch with her/him?
- *watch her/his kids when needed?
- *offer comfort when grief attacks?
- *share from my heart with her/him?
- *try to bring healing to scarred past?
- *see that I speak or act out the Word?
- *give food or clothes in time of need?
- *give her/him little surprises occasionally?
- *listen when she/he is misunderstood by others?
- *stand shoulder to shoulder through all her/his trials?
- *take her/him to an appointment if she/he needs a ride?
- *seek to bring peace to her/him from the stings of the world's arrows?
- *tell her/him that I love her/him, that I would lay down my life for her/him?
- *speak lovingly to her/him to bring understanding of those who love her/him not?
- *pray for my BFF?

So, if I ask myself, who my BFF is, what would be my answer?

My husband? My wife? My female/male friend? My mother or father?

What happens if I ask myself the above questions and reference them to my relationship to Jesus? Does He show up on my list? Is He at the top of the list?

So, this is what the devotional did for my thinking: If the old saying is true...to have a friend, you must be a friend...and if Jesus is my BFF, then how do I treat Him?

Do I...

- *keep in touch with Him?
- *offer to help His children?
- *speak or act out the Word?
- *share from my heart with Him?
- *carry on a conversation in prayer with Him?
- *give comfort to Him for the hurts of those who love Him not?
- *tell Him that I love Him, that I would lay down my life for Him?

Two of the people in Jesus' life that I would consider His BFFs are Mary, sister of Martha and Lazarus, and the disciple John. Would we treat Jesus as Mary and John did?

Do we lean upon our best friend's breast as John the Beloved did, just to be near Him, or sit at His feet as Mary did, just to serve Him in worship by pouring out our thanks and our tears as fragrant oil upon His body?

Here's your question: Who is your BFF?

May Jesus be your...Best Friend Forever!

~ Lynn Mosher

Born and raised in a Christian home in Kentucky, Lynn Mosher has been a believer since the age of 11. Lynn lives with her husband of 44 years in their empty nest in Kentucky. On occasion, the three offspring, who have flown the coop, come to visit, accompanied by a lovable son-in-law, daughter-in-law, and three precious granddaughters. During this time, the Lord placed the desire in her heart to write for Him. She now writes in obedience and, in addition to devotionals and inspirational writings, which can be found on her blog [Heading Home](#), she is putting the final touches on her first book.



[Home](#)

A Better Definition of Love



I once heard a parent assure an anxious mother-to-be, "We don't just *love* our children--we fall *in love* with them."

That always summed it up for me. When my children were born, I fell, and hard. I wasn't just in love--I was besotted, like some Victorian romance heroine. I was enchanted by the feel of them in my arms, intoxicated by their fragrance. I couldn't resist stroking those downy little heads, kissing those perfect little feet. Such love for them consumed me. What a glorious introduction to motherhood! My heart was even fuller than my womb.

For me, such passion was as inevitable as the labor pains. If delivering my children was challenging, loving them was effortless. It wasn't childbirth that was natural--it was falling in love with my children. It was the only way I knew how to be a mother. Growing up as an adopted child surrounded by

love, I also knew that such feelings had nothing whatsoever to do with biology. My identity was grounded on the rock-solid assurance of my mother's devotion. As described in the adoption poem, my mom was one who "never forgot for a single minute, that I didn't grow *under* her heart, but *in* it."

I had every reason to believe that a mother's love just came naturally with the baby. With these assurances in mind, my husband and I answered God's invitation to become adoptive parents ourselves. At His urging, we prepared to welcome our third child through an international adoption. The process was especially difficult, but I endured my "paper pregnancy" like any expectant mom, eagerly anticipating the arrival of our daughter. As I "labored" with stacks of paperwork, home visits, and other challenges, I was confident that these efforts would be rewarded. I knew that my joy was certain to outweigh every trial.

As I left for China, I didn't know quite what to expect from such a unique delivery, but if anything, I felt sure it would be even more wonderful. My two-year pregnancy was about to end, and without even a single contraction! At long last I entered the hotel, and walked up the stairs that led me to my baby. The setting was beautiful and perfect; my daughter, even more so. However, something was wrong, and it appeared to be with me. Where was my excitement? My happy tears? What I had envisioned as a joyful reunion felt more like a strangely awkward blind date. I was disappointed, but still hopeful. Surely it was only a matter of time.

In the following days, I continued to care for Elizabeth, hoping desperately that my maternal instincts would eventually kick in. However, while I acted like her mother, I couldn't make myself feel like it. As we prepared to fly home, the only thing I felt with any certainty was a growing sense of panic. If I didn't feel like her mother, how could I ever be a *good* one? How could God ask me to pledge myself forever to such a total stranger?

Bewildered and terrified, I cried out daily for God to take away my doubts and fears, but

without success. It took every ounce of faith I had just to get on the plane. I was hoping things might still improve once I returned home. However, even surrounded by my loving family, I felt just as empty and isolated as I had amongst strangers in a foreign hotel.

Seeing everyone around me welcome Elizabeth so wholeheartedly only made me more miserable. I envied all the concern for her wellbeing, while my own suffering went unnoticed. On top of everything else, I also felt horribly guilty and ashamed--guilt for my unloving feelings toward an innocent child, guilt for failing as a mother, and far too ashamed to confess my struggles. How could I possibly tell anyone that I didn't love my child? Worst of all, I was angry at God. After months of faithful obedience and sacrifice, this was my reward? More suffering? Why would He do this to me?

In the coming months, I did my best to act like a good mother, all the while feeling like an imposter. More than a year later, I was still pleading with God to give me the love I was missing. The love I needed. The love I *deserved*. His answer was most unexpected: "You don't need *more* love--you just need to stop measuring the wrong kind."

What?

"Pam, you are waiting on a love that *you* want--that makes *you* feel *good*. I never promised that. I called you to love her in the way that blesses her, and honors me--and you are doing that already."

See, I had been wrong the whole time. The problem was not with God, or my daughter, or even me--it was with my pitiful, limited definition of love. To deepen my love, I had to broaden my understanding of it. The love God commands us to is *agapeo*, "the *active* love of God for his Son and his people, and the *active* love his people are to have for God, each other and even enemies." In other words, love is not just an emotion, but action--a verb as well as a noun. The love God offers us is as costly as it is precious.

Previously, I had known love to be effortless, requiring little more from me other than I enjoy it. When God invited me to become Elizabeth's mother, He also invited me to love as *He* did, with a selfless, sacrificial love that took everything I had. To know love at its essence, I first had to see that it is *lived* even more than it is *felt*. Once I grasped this, with great joy I could finally recognize how much I loved my daughter. My love wasn't lacking in any way--it was *more* than enough.

Enough to leave my family behind and fly halfway around the world to get her. Enough to overcome doubt and fear, board that plane and bring her home. Enough to stand before the judge on adoption day and promise to be her family forever. I loved her with every kiss, every hug, every tender word. There never has been a time when I didn't love her, and today, as I continue to love her as God loves me, I know that there never will be.

"This is my commandment: Love each other in the same way I have loved you. There is no greater love than to lay down one's life for one's friends." -John 15:12-13, NLT

"Christ's love is greater than anyone can ever know, but I pray that you will be able to know that love. Then you can be filled with the fullness of God." -Ephesians 3:19, New Century Version

~ Pamela R. Watts

God taught me long ago that it is *because of Him* we have a story to tell, and it is *for Him* that we tell it. My pastor taught me that my writing is a kind of "literary sanctification"--being refined by God *through* my story-telling. He is refining me just now in my latest work, *Measuring Up at Last: Realigning Your Way to Freedom in Christ*, which can be found at [The Measure of God's Grace](#). I live in Waco, Texas, with my husband and four children, who give me lots of stories to tell--and who also refine me!

[Home](#)



Personalities and the Fireworks of Love



Ah, February . . . the month of rakkus, die Liebe, amor, armour and amore. Just as there are hundreds of ways to say "love," there are just as many ways to express it to those nearest and dearest to our hearts.

The big question, however, is do you know what says "I love you" to your beloved? Further complicating this issue is the fact that many of us marry our exact opposite; what whispers love to us may scream yuck to our other half. That adds an entire new level of difficulty when it comes to sending a heart

into loving palpitations.

Understanding personalities provides an important edge when finding the perfect way to make a heart explode with fireworks of amore instead of bombs stuffed with loveless shrapnel.

Sanguine and Melancholy

Is your beloved full of enthusiasm and a tireless seeker of fun? This sanguine personality loves to celebrate . . . no matter the occasion. If a sanguine holds your heart, cherish them with surprises, big or small. Better yet, don't wait until Valentine' Day: sanguine hearts love

surprises every day! Surprises and spontaneity are fun. Trinkets, a humorous movie, or a giggly stroll through the zoo; it doesn't matter. Laughs! Lots of laughs warm the hearts of these bright lively people.

But, remember I said that opposites attract? Sanguine personalities often find themselves captivated by those of the melancholy persuasion. Melancholy personalities tend to be more subdued and orderly. They characteristically keep their surrounding very organized and enhanced with beautiful things. The language that whispers love to this subdued charmer usually includes quiet dinners and fireplaces more so than fun venues full of people and rollicking activities which usually delight sanguine people.

Many Valentine celebrations between these two opposite personalities go from fabulous fireworks to a bunch of duds snuffed out by two disappointed hearts. The sanguine anticipated a fun night on the town, while the melancholy ached for a quiet romantic dinner at home. Both went to bed mad.

Choleric and Phlegmatic

The other opposite personalities that tend to steal each other's hearts are the choleric and the phlegmatic. Like the sanguine and melancholy, these personalities are often hopelessly drawn to one another. That is my story. I am the typical phlegmatic who easily goes with the flow in any situation. I am laid back and dream of massages followed by relaxing bubbles baths. I naturally help others feel at ease and comfortable.

My husband, on the other hand, is a choleric go-getter who thrives on accomplishment. He sets goals, meets them, and sets more! If something needs doing, he does it as opposed to me who ponders and procrastinates and gets it done later . . . much later. He is intense and wants accomplishment; I just want to be loved and valued for being me.

Early in our marriage Valentine's Day was less about love and more about war. I banned it from our house for several years. I hated the disappointment of Warren doing for me instead of giving me his heart. As a choleric doer, letting go of his heart was very difficult.

Understanding Makes Love Easier

Whether you are married to your exact opposite or not, understanding your sweetie's personality is the first step to making Valentine's Day, or any other day, bright with the fireworks of love instead of the stink bombs of disappointment. Here are some simple hints I'd like to share.

Are you in love with a sanguine person? Know that their hearts leap when fun reigns supreme. They also feel loved when they have your undivided attention on special occasions or any time. They tend to be affectionate. If you are not physically demonstrative, make an effort to hold their hand. Small, affectionate gestures show them that you really care.

Does a melancholy person hold your heart? Understand that a quiet evening planned ahead of time registers high on their love meter. Quiet times refresh this sensitive spirit, whereas lively celebrations drain them physically and emotionally.

If you are captivated by a choleric it helps to know they thrive on accomplishment. One way to make their heart race is to acknowledge the many things they do . . . and, believe me, they do a lot. I never have to make my husband a TO DO list. I always make an effort to let him know how much I appreciate everything he does.

If your beloved is phlegmatic understand that they just want to know you value them for who they are. They tend to blend in with their surroundings as opposed to the other three personalities which have traits that stand out. A phlegmatic person generally does not demand anything from anybody, but simple tokens of love (kind words, small gifts, an affectionate smile) given freely speak volumes to this low-keyed personality.

Setting Off the Fireworks of Love

So, how does a high-spirited sanguine and a demure, quiet-loving melancholy destine to spend Valentine's Day together avoid disappointment? What about the mission-minded choleric and the go-with-the-flow phlegmatic? One option is to alternate the way to celebrate. Take turns doing what each personality truly enjoys. Or, perhaps, mix and match both desires into the same evening: a quiet dinner followed by dancing or a lively activity that includes dessert and a quiet movie at home.

It really doesn't matter what activities a couple pursues as long as the relationship includes each partner having access to the things that are important to him or her. One way to do this is remember what it says in 1 Corinthians 13:5 about love: "***It does not insist on its own way***" (NRSV). That is where many couples get into trouble no matter their personalities . . . each individual insists on doing things their way without considering what really speaks love to their partner.

This Valentine's Day and beyond, make an effort to know what really whispers *I love you* to your beloved. If you can factor in the personality types, that will make it easier to set off the fireworks of love in your sweetie's heart.

Resources

For anyone who is interested in exploring the personalities further, there are several resources available. I wrote a regular column for Take Root Publications (formerly Take Root and Write) titled [Purely Personalities](#) that is still available through the site's archives. (Since the column is no longer active, the easiest way to find access to it is to type "Purely Personalities" in the search box located in the right-hand margin on the main page at [Take Root Publications](#).)

Also available on the Internet are recorded live webinars that Shonda Whitworth and I hosted through Christian Women Affiliate starting in December of 2009. The first webinar we hosted, [Mysteries of the Four Personality Types](#), was an introduction to the personalities; the subsequent webinars build on the information presented in that first session. All the recordings are available at no cost. The best way to find the personality webinars is to visit the [CWA webinar page](#) and click each month's archive library.

Lastly, for those who love to read, the book [Wired That Way](#) by Marita Littauer is a wonderful way to gain deeper insights. There is a companion [personality profile](#) available for those

interested in determining individual personalities, as well as a [workbook](#).

BIO

Shona loves to empower people with an understanding of personalities. She is a Certified Personality Trainer. She has done many webinars on all aspects of applying the personalities in everyday life. You can find more information about Shona and her personality presentations on her blog at www.shonaneff.com.

She also serves as Senior Editor for [Take Root Publications](#) and is co-founder of [StepUP Writing and Speaking Services](#).



[Home](#)

Five-Paragraph Christianity



The first essay I assigned for my college freshmen composition class was the five-paragraph essay, but I would always clarify, "As you grow as writers, you will want to stop using this blueprint." The five-paragraph essay has all the components necessary to write an essay (thesis, facts, personal opinions, etc.), but it is a basic standard from which to experiment and creatively grow. Mature writers will take those same elements and produce something original and breathtaking.

I taught night classes, so I had a variety of students. However, I could somewhat organize them into groups. This grouping helped me to better serve my students' needs. First, I had my recent high school graduates. Some of these young students had the five paragraph essay memorized. The others had heard of it, but they didn't understand all the elements and the purpose of it. Next, I had older students who hadn't touched a school book in years. If they had learned the basics of writing an essay, they didn't remember and had developed a fear of writing. Last, I had English as a Second Language (ESL) students. These students had acquired academic ideologies that were completely foreign to the western culture's style of expressing thought. Fundamental difficulties with language usage were hindrances for them, not to mention weaving words together to convey ideas. Within all these groups, I had students who wanted to

grow as writers and students who just wanted to pass and get as far away from writing as possible.

I say all this because I've been learning a lot about grace lately. I'm discovering that there is a five-paragraph Christianity (cultural Christianity) that is the basic standard of living out faith today. Five-paragraph Christianity definitely serves its purpose: it provides a blueprint with the basic elements of faith. The thesis of Christianity is that God is the Creator, Jesus is the Savior and the Holy Spirit is the Counselor, and we are called to love the Trinity and love others. The facts to support the thesis are found in the Bible. And the personal opinions come from the Holy Spirit's movement in our lives. But, I have discovered that I have limited myself and others based upon a standard form of living our faith, and I have left no room for personal creativity and God's grace.

There are Christians who have grown up in Christian homes, knee-deep in Christian life-style. They know how to live by standard Christian expectations because they have seen it played-out all of their lives. Some of them embrace the standard, finding security in the familiar; others, however, never understood the purpose of it and haven't found it fulfilling. Moreover, there are Christians who have strayed from living out their faith. They haven't committed to any Christian disciplines (attending church, praying, reading the Bible, etc.) for many years, and they are scared about fitting in and/or learning to live by faith again. Finally, there are new Christians who know nothing about cultural Christianity. Praying is like talking to one's self, reading the Bible is like struggling through a boring history book and attending church is like going to the circus. Everything is strange and bewildering!

As a mentor, I would explain to all of them the importance of the Christian disciplines and try to illuminate the main thesis of Christianity. But, I would also emphasize that Holy Spirit wants to mature us beyond the standard. I would point out that every influential leader in the Bible and church history was unique and part of a cutting-edge, Holy Spirit inspired movement. Christians who stand out grow beyond the norm of the day, so they can reach the changing people of tomorrow with the Gospel. I would tell them to cling closely to the Holy Spirit's guidance, and to use their God-given creativity to fulfill the amazing purposes that He has designed for them. Most importantly, I would urge them to put their hope and security in God and not people!

Many Christians (I included) have submitted to five-paragraph Christianity, and have not let themselves or others grow beyond the cultural standard. Because of fear or pride, we will not lean on God's grace and start creatively using the fundamental elements of Christianity to compose a beautiful, original essay that expresses the glory of God. The Body of Christ is made up of members, and we all have people that we directly impact. I for one want to encourage everyone in my sphere of influence to grow beyond the typical structure of cultural Christianity and live a life worth reading. Nevertheless, I want to be cognizant of the diversity of God's people and allow others the freedom to write their essays how they please.

I want to give grace to the Christian who is struggling with letting go of her comfort zone.

I want to give grace to the Christian who is still trying to come to terms with her faith.

I want to give grace to the Christian who has forsaken God but wants to recover her spiritual

footing.

I want to give grace to the new Christian who finds everything about faith strange and confusing.

I will enlighten people to five-paragraph Christianity when they are just beginning or feel lost, but I want to encourage Christians who are ready for growth to stretch beyond the norm into the unique direction God is calling them to. Whether they want to stick with the norm or take a step of faith into God's unknown is fine by me. I will love them either way. I will not judge nor will I compare; I choose to love and encourage.

There is so much freedom in allowing others to choose their own way. This freedom gives us more energy, creativity and grace to write our own essays for God. Let us by grace compose, side by side, our individual life stories so that the world can see the array of God's divine beauty poured out onto those who love Him. "As God's co-workers we urge you not to receive God's grace in vain" (2 Corinthians 6.1 NIV).

~ Alisa Hope Wagner

Alisa has a God-given passion to write, and she loves to write about what the Holy Spirit is currently teaching her. She is the founder of [Granola Bar Devotional Writing Ministry](#), which helps publish and share women's faith-story. She writes Christian meditations on her personal website, [Faith Imagined](#). She is also a contributor for [Internet Cafe](#). She and her husband lead a church homegroup and enjoy homeschooling their three children.



[Home](#)

Learning to Look Beyond Our Expectation



If you walk into a crowded room of people you do not know, who do you migrate toward? Do you have a mental list of measurement traits? No! No! Don't tell me. Just think about it. I think we all do. It is human nature.

I remember doing the same thing....sitting down by someone who *looked* like they would make a nice friend. Yet, they were not the relationship, the friend God had in store for me. By not looking beyond my expectations, I had missed the Lord's companion.

I do not mean that I came to expect more. I mean my expectations were re-defined, like Mary's relationship expectations were re-defined.

Mary had help seeing the companion God provided. An angel told her, "Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be barren is in her sixth month. For nothing is impossible with God" (Luke 1:36,37 NIV).

I do not doubt that Elizabeth would have been the last person Mary would have sought out for companionship and relationship. After all, she was an *old* woman. Mary's story speaks to us as clearly as the angel did. The Lord provided an ally, a companion, a friend who understood and believed what the Lord had told her. The catch? Mary had to look beyond her expectations.

Mary heeded the angel. How hungry she must have been to share her burden with someone who could understand. "At that time Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea" (Luke 1:39 NIV). Elizabeth welcomed and honored her.

God's guide will welcome your companionship, not scrunch you into a busy schedule or emit a charity-case mentality.

Yet, keep in mind that first, Mary hurried to meet her, and then she greeted her first. You cannot wait for this person to come into your home, sit down, and comfort you. You must prepare your heart through prayer (Mary got ready), move out of your comfort zone of friends (Mary left her town and hurried to a town in the hill country), and then introduce yourself (Mary greeted Elizabeth). Mary could not have known Elizabeth would have received her so warmly, but she took the chance. You need to take that chance, too.

The benefits of fellowship with God's companion are spiritual blessings. When the two women got together, Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. They were bold about the Lord's place in their lives. Then, so wonderfully, so simply, Elizabeth encouraged Mary saying, "Blessed is she who has believed that what the Lord has said to her will be accomplished." (Luke 1: 45 NIV). Mary probably needed someone to tell her she was not crazy, that what happened was real. Who could better understand the condition of Mary's heart and mind than a woman who had been barren all her life and probably condemned for it! Mary was pregnant and was

condemned for it. Yet, here was somebody who understood the power and might of the great I AM.

Mary's Song is evidence of her belief that God provided peace in a very difficult situation: "My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant..." (Luke 1:46-48 NIV). These two women's shared common experience enabled them to comfort each other.

Find friends who lift you up when you are down. Comfort comes with encouraging words, not discouraging words. Surround yourself with people who talk about overcoming the challenging, not the stench that created the challenge. Make sure they support! Re-define the expectations of your support group.

The next time you walk into a room full of women, where will your eyes go?

~ Maryleigh Bucher

Maryleigh is a child of divorce become whole as daughter of The King. Married for 27 years, mother of 5 boys to men, she has been a college composition instructor, teaching college-bound composition to homeschool students, journalist and freelance writer/editor. Maryleigh is the author of [Blue Cotton Memory](#), a blog about the faith, love and politics of raising boys to men and creator of *Standing at the Cross Roads*, a program designed for teens and college students to break/prevent cycles of dysfunction by understanding the gifts and plans God has each of us.



[Home](#)

Two Can Play This Game



"The Lord said, 'It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him'" (Gen 2:18 NIV).

My marriage is in trouble. It all started a few years ago, when I drifted away from...Diet Coke. Mark and I were both in it for the long haul with our addiction to Diet Coke. But one day at a fast-food restaurant I was forced to drink Diet Pepsi because they didn't have Coke products...and I liked it! Now this was the real thing! The war was on.

Depending on who's doing the shopping, our refrigerator is either stocked with Coke or Pepsi products. I know it probably sounds selfish of me to keep bringing Pepsi home, but since Mark doesn't have a clue what's good for him, and I do, I have to make these tough decisions myself. I'm just taking care of my man! After all, isn't the woman the 'helper'

mentioned in the above scripture? One day Mark will finally discover the real thing, and I'll be doing the I- told- you- so dance.

Some people read that scripture about the woman being a helper, and they put the woman in her place, tout de suite. She's supposed to be barefoot and pregnant, and work like a slave doing laundry, cooking and cleaning, right? Wait a New York minute. Isn't the husband expected to help out once in a while too? A healthy marriage takes two helpers (as long as one of the two isn't Hamburger Helper).

The dictionary's definition of helper: "an extra locomotive attached to a train at the front, middle, or rear, to provide extra power for climbing a steep grade" (Dictionary.com). I'm sorry, but I'm too weak and fragile to be pushing a locomotive around. That sounds like a job for a man. So just what is the husband supposed to do?

"In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. After all, no one ever hated their own body, but they feed and care for their body, just as Christ does the church-for we are members of his body. 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.'" (Eph 5:28-31 NIV). So it stands to reason if the two are one, we should help each other.

A wise mentor once said that a husband is like the soldier at the front line of war. He shoulders the brunt of the battle, protecting his wife and keeping her safe. Isn't that beautiful? Here's a mental picture to drive home the point: the next time we go camping, my husband, Mark, will take off his shirt and forge his way through the woods ahead of me, so the mosquitoes never make it past the front line. Hey, I warned you it was a mental picture!

Here's an even better picture of the servant husband, right out of the Bible. As Jesus was making preparations for the last supper, He instructed Peter and John to look for the man carrying a jar of water, and ask if they could use the man's upper room for the Passover (Luke 22:10). My NIV study notes read: "It was extraordinary to see a man carrying a jar of water,

since this was normally woman's work." Guess what? This was the man Jesus chose to host His dinner party.

Even in modern day America, we find it extraordinary to see men doing women's work. There are still lots of men in my family alone who fill their bellies at Thanksgiving, and then retreat to the den to watch football, leaving the women (who cooked the meal) to clean up the mess afterward. There is only one man in my family who you will find carrying dirty dishes to the sink, and that would be my husband, the official postmodern water jar carrier.

So there you have it, the evidence is in. The husband and wife are to serve each other. How's your marriage? Is it all give and take, with more taking than giving? God can bring balance to that equation, but He might be expecting a little help on your part. You be nice and help your mate! That's what I had to do. But don't make me give up my Diet Pepsi. Anything but that!

~ Deborah Erdmann

Deborah is first and foremost a friend of God. She is also a wife, mother and grandmother. God has called Deborah to write humorous devotionals, and a book is currently in the making. She is also a featured writer for her local newspaper, contributing articles on coffee and God, with that same brand of humor. Deborah has 3 blog sites, each with a specific purpose to glorify God: [Heavenly Humor](#) is her main blog, where she shares her heart and humor. [Markings in the Wood](#) is a place to go for solitude and rest in God's Presence. And [Poetry & Paradise](#) where she dabbles in poetry.



[Home](#)

Author Interview: Alex Marestaing



What inspired you to write *Izzy's Popstar Plan*, a devotional for tween/teen girls?

I used to be a musician, and I still like to write music sometimes. One day this song came to me and from that song came the idea for my character, Izzy, a sixteen year-old musician trying to make it in the Hollywood music scene. Of course, I had to put this new character in a story, and that's when *Izzy's Popstar Plan* was born.

My two preteen daughters watch a lot of Disney Channel shows, such as *Shake It Up* and *Good Luck Charlie*. Those shows are fun and full of music, so I usually don't mind them watching, but overall the characters are pretty shallow. So in *Izzy's Popstar Plan* I wanted to create a girl that was deep thinking and

creative, a girl that was strong and had an awesome relationship with God, more of a role model for my two daughters. I like the way Izzy turned out, definitely deeper than *Hannah Montana*.

What gave you the unique idea to weave a devotional into a fictional novel?

I had read devotionals to my own two daughters before, and the Bible study parts were great, but sometimes the stories seemed kind of thrown together, and my kids would lose interest. So I wanted to write a devotional series that kids could really get into, a strong novel that kids, and their parents, couldn't wait to read each night.

Our kids live in a rough world, a world that doesn't really respect Christianity anymore. In order for their faith to survive they're going to have to hang on to God and to His word. Hopefully, the *Izzy* books will point them in the right direction.

Can you discuss the interactive elements of this devotional experience and how it will affect the new generation of Christians?

Izzy's Popstar Plan is what I call a book in 3D. Besides being a novel, there's a website where readers can watch video blogs, check out "Izzy's" interviews with Christian bands like *Leeland*, and catch up with the main character's life by reading bonus blogs that aren't in the book. Readers can also watch an *Izzy* video at the *Revolve Tour*, a ministry event for teen and tween girls that's visiting arenas across the country right now.

Whether we like it or not, the web and social media is here to stay. It's changed the way kids think, and the way kids read. Because of iPhones and Internet, kids now crave multimedia experiences, experiences that allow them to watch, listen, and even interact. Of course, some of the media trends out there can be unhealthy, but when media is used right, it can be a powerful tool to communicate with kids and motivate them to live for God.

What are your future plans for Izzy?

I just finished writing book two, *Izzy's Popstar Plan: The Album*, which comes out in July, and I have ideas for two more *Popstar* books after that. Until then, I'll be bringing an *Izzy* video along with me as I speak to church youth groups this spring and summer.

Ultimately, I would love to see the songs *Izzy* sings in the books come to life in the form of an album, but that's just a dream of mine. We've recorded some tracks already, but just haven't found the right team of musicians yet. So, hey, if you know of any good musicians, send them our way :).

Until then, we'll just have to wait and see what God has in store. It's exciting.

Author: Alex Marestaing

Book Series: Izzy's Pop Star Plan (Thomas Nelson 2011)

Blog: <http://alexmarestaing.wordpress.com/>

Book Site: <http://www.izzyspopstarplan.com/>

Book and Book Tour Trailer: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ikvr5c9ZLFw>

Twitter: [Alexmarestaing](#)

Facebook Fan Page: [Izzy's Pop Star Plan](#)

Author Alex Marestaing has worked on creative projects for *The Walt Disney Company*, *Lego*, *Thomas Nelson* and *The Los Angeles Times*. In addition, he's written freelance for various Christian publications and has covered soccer in Europe and the U.S.



[Home](#)

Not Exactly a Fairy Tale



I've been convicted of two things lately: one, that I run from difficulty; and two, I am incredibly selfish.

If you think about it, it really all comes down to that I am incredibly selfish. I run from difficulty because I want to be comfortable. I want to be comfortable because I am selfish.

Amusingly, I thought I was a pretty selfless person....that is, until I got married. Just a little over a year ago-Oh! How blind I was! But, God is using marriage to break me of my selfishness and make me more like Christ. It is painful, but also worth it!

Looking back on my singleness, I realize much of my desire to be married was selfish. Sure, I knew in my head that marriage isn't a cake

walk, that I was called to serve my spouse, that it wouldn't cure my loneliness, etc. But in my heart I still believed that marriage would be great because it *would* cure my loneliness-at least most of it. I would always have a BFF and someone to talk to and hang out with and to cuddle. Also, I would have a person who would protect me. Basically, I wanted to be coddled.

Don't get me wrong. Marriage *is* great and Jeff *is* my best friend and we enjoy many moments of cuddling, laughing and hanging out. But marriage is great for different reasons than I thought - it is making me more like Christ. And though that is great, it is also painful. So marriage

isn't for the faint-hearted or for those who want to be coddled.

God is SO GOOD. Had I known this fully about marriage and had I known the depths of my selfishness, I probably would have run the other way. I would have thought I wasn't ready.

But, obviously, God thought I was ready because He made it very clear to me that I was supposed to marry Jeff. He is gracious to have kept me subconsciously and blissfully ignorant!

He did answer my prayer-not just my prayer to be married, but a different prayer. When I was about 23 years old, I heard a speaker talk about singleness. She challenged us to pray this prayer: "Lord, do not take the gift of singleness away from me until You have done all You can in and through me with my singleness."

This thought terrified me: What if God NEVER is done using my singleness? I had to come to terms with the truth that that would be OK. I could be happy and content with singleness for the rest of my life. And no, that is not when God brought Jeff to me. (I HATE it when people say stuff like, "When I learned to be content, that is when I met my husband!" bleh.)

There was no "arriving" at any level. Every day I prayed that prayer. Some days, I truly meant it and some days God had to work in the depths of my heart for me to lay my desires to be married on the altar. I had seasons when I was content and joyful and LOVED being single and seasons when I really struggled and just wanted to be married.

And then God brought Jeff to me--in the midst of the seasons. Now I see how God really did answer my "Singleness Prayer." He was done using singleness in my life to make me more like Christ. It was time to use marriage.

It's not exactly a fairy tale, but it's my story that God is writing. I love the Author of my life because He is so good and perfect and knows exactly what is right for me. I am thankful for my time being single and I am thankful to be married to a man who loves God and is stumbling after Him with me though we are both far from perfect. I am thankful that my heart is in a place of gratefulness today. Now onto that selfishness...

~ April R. Knapp

April is a full-time missionary to college students with Campus Crusade for Christ. She is passionate about seeing others meet Jesus and helping others understand the Gospel and apply it to their lives. She is also a freelance writer and is known to partake in spontaneous, crazy adventures. You can read more of her writing on her blogs, [Reflections of a Sojourner](#) and [Cup of Delight](#).



[Home](#)

When You Want To Run Away



As I entered Maddie's bedroom, she was throwing clothes in a purple duffel bag.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"Running away," she said.

"Oh, you can't take those clothes with you," I said.

"Why not?"

"Mommy and Daddy paid for those. You can only take the things you bought with your own

money."

She scans the room desperate to find something, anything. "But, I didn't buy anything."

"Well, I guess you'll have to run away without the clothes or books you put in that bag. In fact, you can't even take that bag because we bought it!"

She walks out the garage door with only the clothes on her back.

"Oh, I guess you can wear those clothes even though they aren't really yours. I wouldn't want you to run away naked."

Maddie looked at me as if I was from another planet. Suddenly, she darted inside the door and disappeared. I wondered what the problem was when she dashed back out with her homework and pencil. *Oh yeah, I think. Can't forget your homework when you're running away because you still might want to attend school.* Now I'm the one staring at my child as if she's crazy.

Sometimes I feel like running away, don't you? Just like Maddie, who was tired of timeouts for bad attitudes and sassy mouths and decided to escape the mean rule enforcers, I too desire to escape relationships that become difficult. I want to have a 46-year-old temper tantrum, stomp my feet and head out the door to the nearest isolated beach which would be challenging in Southern Indiana. Rather than confront, I long to flee. Perhaps if I close my eyes and tap my feet three times, I'll wake up in a peaceful place. Unfortunately, as long as I inhale and exhale, that is unlikely to occur.

Instead, I am living with a sullen, unhappy teenager. She broke the rules, forfeited the use of her cell phone, and three months later finally earned it back. In the meantime, the girl mopes sad-faced, barely talking and answering with one word responses, such as "yes," "no," and "I don't know." She refuses to express herself and keeps all her emotions as tightly locked up as an inmate in a jail cell. Everyone knows that good parenting requires badgering a teen with questions: How was school? *Fine.* How did gymnastics go? *Fine.* What homework do you

have? *English*. Even asking open-ended questions is painful. Agh! What's a mom to do with a girl who is determined to be miserable and take everyone with her? I pray agonizing pleas, like "Help me, God! I don't have a clue how to handle this. Give me wisdom...now!"

I long for my girl to be happy, to love life, to experience joy. I wish for some magic drink that guarantees the transformation of a child's mood...forever! Sales of a potion like that would cause an upswing in this depressed economy. However, I suppose it's a good thing that people aren't like puppets on a string, manipulated to act the way the master desires them to. I can't force my teen to drink a concoction simply to get her to respond in a way I deem appropriate. Just as I am thankful that God allows me to choose Him, choose life, choose my attitude, so I desire the same for all of God's creation. Yes, even my teenager, much to my chagrin!

God is teaching me many things through this challenging experience with my daughter. Firstly, I can't control and manipulate her. I can't be everywhere she is and micro-manage her day. Nor do I want to, I'm discovering. I yearn for her to become more God-sufficient rather than self-sufficient. Rather than cajole, force and beg, I must model, influence and teach. I still make the most of every opportunity even when she rolls her eyes. When her eyes glaze over and she appears bored, I keep persevering.

Secondly, my teen's sour mood doesn't catapult me into despair also. When I receive the one to two word responses-yes, no, maybe, I guess-I energetically recount the events of my day with the hope of capturing her interest. I realize she's probably as excited to hear about it as listening to fingernails scrape across the blackboard. Still, I chat excitedly because she may be caught unawares into a conversation she never intended to enter.

Additionally, I've learned that plaguing my daughter with questions is not going to evoke quality responses. Questions put her on the defensive faster than an eagle swooping out of the sky to attack its prey. It's surprising that a simple "How was your day?" can throw my teen into a suspicious attitude. Her head tilts and eyes squint in a "why are you asking" and "what is your ulterior motive" manner. She shuts down. I stop asking questions.

Recently, I asked a psychologist friend, "But, what if my daughter seems depressed? Shouldn't I ask her how she's doing?" My friend's wisdom, although almost impossible for a nosy parent like me, was enlightening. She encouraged me to ask the initial question and then bug off if my sixteen-year-old doesn't want to talk. Then she advised me to say to her, "If you want to talk, I'm here," and walk away. This information was freeing for me as a parent. I express my thoughts and feelings openly, yet my daughter is wired differently. While it's difficult for me to grasp why she doesn't spew everything out of her mouth, I am recognizing that it's all right that she may not need to do the same. Still, I want her to know that anytime she desires to talk about anything, I am available.

Finally, God is showing me that even though I am not in control, I can pray-for her and for our relationship. Truthfully, I trusted more in my ability to control the relationship than I believed in the power of prayer. Ephesians 3:20-21 (NIV) has become a powerful reality to me in the midst of this situation. "Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or

imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen." God can do more than I can possibly dream. I'm learning to pray more consistently and expansively, because He is able without my interference.

Relationships are challenging. They bring out the manipulating, conniving con artist in all of us. When the going gets tough, we want to slip out the door like a snake slithering through the grass. We long to pack our bags and escape on the next airplane out of town. With a teen in the house, communication deteriorates, bad attitudes reign and conflict escalates. Soothing an incessantly crying newborn sounds more appealing. The temptation to become an assistant for a magician's disappearing act is strong. Yet, we stay the course. We are committed to the high calling of parenting to the best of our ability and in the strength of an all-sufficient God.

~ Annette Stronger

Annette lives in Indiana with her amazing husband, two awesome teens and one spunky tween. Her passions include savoring dark chocolate and sipping Starbucks mochas, especially alongside good friends. Through her writing, Annette hopes to encourage other women in their faith journey using her life experiences. She contributes to [Main Stream](#) and [Devo Kids](#). Her personal blog is [Renewed Heart](#).



[Home](#)

Relationship Idols



I'm reading the book of Jeremiah, where the big battle is Israel's adoration for idols, and I thought about what an idol really is. Anything that captures all of your attention and thought life is really an idol - a fact didn't like. I realized that I centered my life on my husband and considered him first in everything.

Through a great amount of struggling in my soul and many intense prayer times with God about idols, I admitted that Jon had become an idol and that it was time for a change. An idol sounds so evil, but it's just whatever you give all your attention to that's not God. It sounds like an easy switch, but it was difficult to make the actual, real heart change; and I even made a covenant with God that He would forever be my focus, my #1 love, my center circuit board. I staked out a claim and committed myself to it.

I saw the movie "Secretariat" and in the last race the horse gained so much speed he ran far, far ahead of all the other horses. I pictured my love and focus on the Lord moving out far, far ahead and beyond my love for anyone else, even my precious husband and daughter. I asked God to actually rewire me to be connected to Him and that He would come first in all things. I asked that God would be my first consideration before inputting data into my brain and that all my processing would begin with Him.

I noticed many Bible leaders who lived their life that way. When King David sinned with Bathsheba and prayed for God's forgiveness, he said that he sinned against God and God alone. I would have thought the sin was to Uriah who lost his life over it, but David was connected to God first. When Goliath was taunting the armies of God, David's view was that Goliath was taunting God Himself. When David approached the giant in battle, he believed that God would defeat the giant, not he alone. When Joseph revealed his identity to his brothers and his brothers repented for selling him into slavery, Joseph replied not to worry-that it was the Lord who sent him on ahead of them to save them from the famine. These men had the upper viewpoint. They were first connected to the Lord and what was happening with everyone else came second.

I knew I needed this viewpoint, and although I cried out for it and made a claim on it, I had no idea how to attain it. I realized that my view of myself was from the reflection in other people's eyes. I practically kicked myself and said, "What am I doing?" My identity needs to be the reflection in God's eyes only. I had a revelation that I was picking up signals of my identity in the eyes of people I cared about, but they're only people. And they're all different, and they have problems of their own that skew their prospective.

My parents split up when I was a kid, and my mom always spoke poorly of my dad. Years later he remarried his second wife, and she always said wonderful things about him. I thought about how the same man, with the same character and behaviors, could be viewed totally different by

these two women he was married to-same man but opposite viewpoints.

I thought about how much daughter loves and adores me, and she tells me so every day. Then I thought about how my son has virtually divorced me, rejected me, and tossed me out of his life. I was just as loving to my son as I am to my daughter. I'm the same mom. I shared my heart with him each day and told him how much I loved him, I spent quality time with him each day, and had fun with him-all of which I do now with my daughter. There's no difference; I'm the same mother and the same person, but I'm viewed totally different by my two kids. If my identity is based on what other people think, whom do I believe?

If our identity is based on the opinions of our loved ones, it is dependent on their imperfect perspectives. People's perspectives are based on their own life experiences. When I was growing up, my mother had a lot of mood swings. I never knew if I was loved by my mother or not. Reading the signals, her love for me seemed to change all the time. I find I still have the same thoughts about her today, and she's 84!

When my husband has mood swings, I often picture myself picking petals from a daisy saying, "He loves me; he loves me not." How crazy is that? But there it is, locked in my brain. The pattern was set while growing up with my mother, and I continued that way of thinking with the rest of my relationships. My husband doesn't understand why I would think he doesn't love me just because he's in a negative mood, but that precedent was set long ago.

The bottom line is that I shouldn't allow people to set a pattern or play a role in my identity at all. God created me, and it's He who knows me better than any human, and it's He who has THE plan for my life, which He intends to carry out. I just have to fix my eyes on the image of me that's reflected in HIS eyes and carry on. God's opinion really matters when the rubber meets the road. Now every day I pray to be able to see myself in God's eyes and no one else. He has the perfect prospective.

"She gave this name to the LORD who spoke to her: 'You are the God who sees me,' for she said, 'I have now seen the One who sees me'" (Genesis 16:13 NIV).

Over the past few years, my family relationships have gone through extreme challenges. The ups and downs have caused me to examine what these relationships are really made of and even question them. God has been bringing up some issues that I didn't want to look at. He has caused me to look at where my focus; and although I knew the answer should be Jesus, I had to admit it was really my husband and my daughter. Together God and I took a look at my focus on Jon. I realized that my love for Jon caused him to be the center of my life instead of God, and I justified it by telling myself that it's just the way I love him--and a good wife should really love her husband. But the Bible says that we should love God above all, which means anyone or anything should come second to Him.

~ Susan Wood

Susan Wood is a founding member of Catskill Mountain Christian Center and has served in compassionate ministry to the homeless of New York City and the victims of the Chernobyl disaster in Belarus. She worked for Citihope International where she also served as outreach programming director for Christian radio, coordinating a variety of New York City ministries. Susan and her husband, Jonathan, founded the [Raptor Project Inc.](#), a rehabilitation and educational effort with birds of prey. Susan, Jonathan and daughter Rachel travel the U.S. on tour each year producing bird shows and exhibits in 28 states. She has been featured on Cornerstone television and CBN. In between road tours, her family divides their time between their New York home and a home on North Padre Island, Texas, where they are members of Bay Area Fellowship.



[Home](#)

Lessons from My Children: Doing Something Great



"I'll make the ears. I'm good at making the ears."

This morning my kids decided to make a picture together as a present for their Dad and me. "Sshhh," at the time it was a secret. I overheard them *working together*

"Okay." And then they were patiently taking turns with one another.

Wow, that puts a smile in a parent's heart. As they were doing it, I was already thinking about how it will go in the memory box with a note that they came up with an idea to make something together and they pulled it off. The beauty of the moment was shattered by high pitch screaming and crying by my daughter.

The intensity of the cry would make you think that she had sliced her finger off, but the cry was not due to an injury but rather it was from a disagreement about the color of the next body part.

The cry resulted in me sending them to their rooms for a "creativity break" and after a couple of minutes I sat and talked first to my daughter and then to the two of them together. The gist of the conversation was that what will make this project special to Mommy and Daddy is *the fact that they are doing it together*. The picture will be beautiful, but what will make it extra special is the fact that they did it together in love. We talked about the need for compromise and cooperation. They returned to their project and happily finished their grand surprise.

Many Christians want to do some "great" project for God. Do you know what often gets in the way of doing something "great" for God? People, especially those closest to us. It is much easier to do a project than it is to love people. I have tons of art pictures by my kids; they shoot them out at about 5-10 pieces a day. Why then was I going to choose to treasure and store this particular picture? Because they did it together, in love. And I thought about God.

Throughout the course of a day, much more the course of human history, there are many people doing "things" in honor of God. But in God's Word, He didn't command us to do 30 great things for Him over the course of the lifetime. Yet, that's what we so often strive after. We as humans still tend to focus on outward projects. We forget that He tells us that God does not look at the outward appearance, but He looks at the heart (1 Samuel 16:7).

What did He ask us to do with our hearts? He has asked us to love one another and yet this single command remains one of the hardest challenges of our lives. Here is just a two requests of love:

"Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for whoever loves others has fulfilled the law" (Romans 13:8 NIV).

"Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth so that you have sincere love for each other, love one another deeply, from the heart" (1 Peter 1:22 NIV).

If you want to do something great for God, love your sisters and brothers in Christ. I know as a parent, there is nothing that excites my heart more than seeing my two children working together in love. I believe that seeing us love one another brings joy to God's heart.

~ Jaime Farkas

Jaime Farkas has been happily married for the last 8 years to her high school sweetheart. She has two beautiful children: a 5 1/2 year old boy and a 4 year old daughter. She is able to stay home with her children full-time and is currently homeschooling them. She leads women's Bible studies through her church. She had the blessing of growing up in a Christian home and is still a Christian! She loves the Lord and He is continually drawing her into deeper relationship with Him. Please visit her at her blog, [For His Glory Alone!](#)

[Home](#)



For the Love of a Son



Not just any steak -- **elk steak**.

If you've never had elk meat, I must say you are truly missing out. It is not at all "gamey," but instead is just down-right good.

No, we are not financially over-privileged folk who are able to go out to fancy restaurants and order elk meat entrees all the time. We have, however, been blessed to have a family member who is an avid hunter and recently went on a special elk hunt with some

friends. We, in turn, benefited from the results of that trip. This has been quite a blessing to us in our recent time of need, as we can turn to the freezer and pull out not just any meat to thaw and cook, but elk meat! Yummy!

But, of course, all good things do come to an end. At least when it comes to our supply of elk meat.

The other night, I cooked the last of this delectable delight. Smothered with sauteed bell peppers and onions, it was quite scrumptious, if I do say so myself.

I even had some of the leftover as a sandwich the next day!

During my Bible study I lead at home, my husband and son had dinner that night together in our dining room. Later, after my friends had left and my son had already gone to bed, I strolled through the dining room and noticed something that touched my heart. There, on the table, was a kid-sized fork next to a small plate which had what else but tiny bits of the remains of the last elk steak.

Our son loves steak--he's only five. He's a picky eater, but he has recently decided he loves steak. So much so that almost anything that could potentially resemble steak is described to him as steak or steak-like (sausage = circle/round steak; ribs = steak, etc.).

My husband loves elk meat -- LOVES elk meat.

But he loves our son more.

That night my husband ate cantaloupe for supper--only cantaloupe. Not the last piece of elk steak.

As much as my husband loves our son, enough to give up his last opportunity to partake of a rare culinary treasure--imagine how much more our Heavenly Father loves us.

Not only did He give up something, He gave up Someone. He willingly gave His Son to come to dwell on this earth with us then die a brutal, undeserved death for us.

He did this because He loves us. He even weaved into the Master plan to raise His Son from the dead so that He (God in the flesh) would once and for all pay the price for us and defeat death so that we can have eternal, abundant life NOW--not just when we go to heaven.

Did you realize your Heavenly Father loves you like that?

"What, then, shall we say in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all--how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?" (Romans 8:31-32 NIV).

"If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!" (Matthew 7:11 NIV).

Consider the facts. Let it sink in. He loves His Son. He loves YOU! Accept His free, undeserved gift. Live like you've received a gift beyond compare. If you've received His Son as your Savior and Lord, then you HAVE received THE gift beyond compare.

Live it! Abundantly! For the love of a Son.

~ Haelie Heard

Haelie is a follower of Christ, wife, mother of a five-year-old son, and a full-time Nurse Informaticist by profession. Her personal blog is [To Not Decide...Is To Decide](#) and you can also find her on [Twitter](#). She also writes for and co-administers two other blogs: [Faithful Feet](#) and [What If...](#). Her life mission is to be a voice, both written and audible, that unapologetically points to Christ and His sovereignly redemptive love and forgiveness.



[Home](#)

Issue Poem: Dancing with My Daddy



Twirling me with gentle care

This Daddy paying careful attention to His Princess
Not just the dress, but shining eyes, and color of my hair
Smiling at my gathered skirt of golden lace and ruffles
Even the soft slippers to cover two ungraceful feet
Oh, how it's special to dance with my Daddy, who is Perfect
While leading through missed steps, His princess, Oh, so sweet
Yes, my Daddy twirling through the hardships
Leading me by His grace-filled hands
Whispering in the quiet dance of His Princess
My beautiful Child, let me lead your trembling hands
Just look into the eyes of your Abba Daddy
Experience My joy of dancing with you, from above
Let go and let Me soak in your gentle beauty
My Princess, in this Dance of your Daddy's Love

~Karen Hopkins

Karen was born into military family in the late 1950s, and Europe became her family's playground. She traveled to many countries, both for the military and for fun and adventure. She moved back to Northern California, where she finished her teen years. She now lives in the mountains of eastern Oregon, where she has learned to appreciate God's beauty. During the snowy and cold of winter, she stays inside and quilts to her heart's content. She donates each little handmade quilt, as an offering of her own healing from her not so pretty past. These quilts are an effort to give a healing touch to other women who have adopted out their own children. You can visit her on her blog at [My Passionate Obsessions](#).



[Home](#)

