

Freefall to Fly



A
BREATH TAKING
JOURNEY

TOWARD a LIFE of

Meaning

REBEKAH LYONS

“Rebekah Lyons writes a vulnerable story of her unexpected winging into the light and dark of mothering, womanhood, and visionary living, only to discover what it means to find the full hope of the sky.”

ANN VOSKAMP

Author of the *New York Times* bestseller *One Thousand Gifts*

“My friend Rebekah Lyons has done what every writer wants to do: she has told her story with such grace and clarity that the reader can’t help but find glimpses of her own story. An important, well-written book that will feel both familiar and inspiring.”

SHAUNA NIEQUIST

Author of *Cold Tangerines*, *Bittersweet*, and *Bread and Wine*

“Surely God wants to use those who are rescued to help rescue others. Rebekah Lyons bravely shares her story of freefall into the arms of her Creator as her search for meaning led to surrender. May we all find hope and courage in our journeys as we embrace the life God intended for us.”

CHRISTINE CAINE

Founder of The A21 Campaign and author of *Undaunted*

“Everyone has to make a leap—of hope, of courage, of life. Rebekah Lyons wants to make sure that nothing—anxiety, despair, depression, or fear—holds you back. She shares candid and powerful stories from her own life with courageous honesty. By the time you finish reading, you won’t be able to resist the opportunity to fly into the fullness of life.”

MARGARET FEINBERG

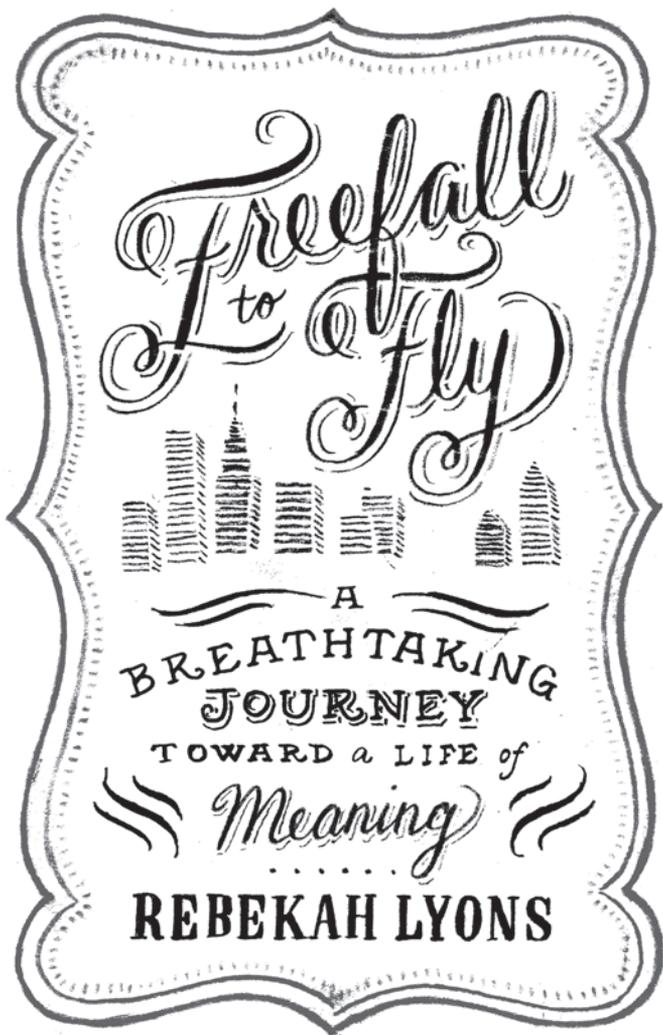
Author of *Wonderstruck* and *Scouting the Divine*

“Rebekah Lyons is an elegant and honest writer who speaks to the weighty struggle of human experience while simultaneously elevating its astonishing beauty and the transformative power of surrender. I’m thrilled Rebekah has given the world a book full of her ideas and insights. All who read *Freefall to Fly* are invited into a beautiful journey infused with truth, hope, and love.”

MELISSA MOORE FITZPATRICK

Living Proof Ministries

Freefall to Fly



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PRELUDE

*Who Will
Catch Me?*



THE TEARS FLOWED with reckless abandon. Face buried, I tried to muffle the ugliness of my guttural cry. Shoulders heaving as I struggled for breath. Lifting my head, I gazed at our closest friends, one by one. I held that moment as long as possible, wishing I could freeze time. Embarrassment mingled with surprise as I tried in vain to speak.

We gathered that lazy June night in Barnsley Gardens near our home in Georgia. Strolling through manicured grounds bursting with peonies, lilacs, and azaleas, we shot group candids from every angle. Clamoring to capture this night's memory through a camera lens. The lovely setting provided space to wander and reminisce before heading inside for dinner.

Now gathered around a U-shaped table, we roared with laughter. The toasts were coming long and loud, each speech's bravado surpassing the one before as glasses clinked and cheers rang out. A night of celebration, laughing, remembering.

True friends. Friends who show up at 3:00 a.m. when you rush your child to the ER kind of friends. Some we had known for only two years, and others for more than a quarter century. My husband, Gabe, sat across from Jason, his friend since second grade. We joked that they shared their twenty-fifth anniversary long before Gabe and I would. Some who journeyed with us had already moved on, but these friends remained and were as real as the air in our lungs. And that meant something. Sojourners who together had weathered job loss, career changes, infertility, adoption, new life, and even a death that came far too soon for one of us.

Try as we might to keep things light, a heaviness hung in the air, ready to descend upon the first moment of delayed silence. You can't get through a night like that without a wave of emotional delirium crashing into a sea of tears. Memory lane took an awkward turn into terms of endearment, but still none of us wanted to admit the real reason for our gathering.

We were saying good-bye.

Thirteen years earlier, my husband and I had moved to Atlanta from Virginia. Recent college graduates. Newlyweds. Armed with eager idealism, we found in Georgia everything we were looking for: a church where we made our faith our own, dream jobs that gave permission for our natural talents to soar, a community that celebrated every milestone as a family. Yet our time was not without struggle.

Our first son, Cade, was born with Down syndrome. A dear friend died of a heart attack in my husband's and another friend's grasp. Moments of bliss were accompanied by moments of tragedy. We pressed into each other as we walked one day at a time.

These people and this city had become my home. My family. My safety. My security. Some of my life's greatest questions had been answered here, and I had established a routine. Margin existed for preparing healthy meals for my three kids, infrequent scrapbooking, dabbling in sewing and DIY projects, hosting celebrations ranging from egg hunts to summer cookouts. Everything seemed perfect. As it should be.

But now we were leaving it all behind.

For New York City, no less.



Sunshine pierced the sky the day the restlessness began. It was a glorious day in August three years prior. Gabe had just finished giving an impassioned talk on “engaging culture” at Trinity Grace Church on Manhattan’s Upper West Side. We left our kids with their grandparents in Atlanta for the weekend, freeing us to bask in the city’s glow. Our lively party headed to Le Monde immediately following, where we huddled over poached eggs and waffles, listening to Pastor Jon Tyson cast a vision for us to join him. His rogue Australian accent marked with passion made him difficult to ignore.

Though we had never considered living in New York, the city represented hallmark moments in our relationship—our first kiss in front of the Rockefeller Center Christmas Tree and, eighteen months later, a fairytale weekend when Gabe rented out the 102nd floor of the Empire State Building to ask me, on bended knee, to marry him. The “Big Apple” was a fantastical city of lights, but it became a place of celebration for us, far removed from laundry lists and grocery shopping and paying bills. The thought that the two worlds might collide sounded crazy. Good thing we were up for crazy.

The day progressed with Jon tour-guiding us on a walk through Central Park. He must make a commission from New York City’s department of tourism. The amble led us past babbling waterfalls, laughing children jumping in water sprayers, and bridges that overlooked rowboats. If you had walked the span of Central Park in the summer, you, too, would have been sold by the time you bit into an organic Applegate Farms hot dog straight from the food cart.

As we explored various pockets of the city that weekend, we found ourselves craving more. We were unconsciously falling in love with New York, resonating with the determination and vulnerability in the faces all around us. After the final church service that evening in Chelsea, Gabe leaned in over late-night coffee and sheepishly asked if I would consider living in this place. His coy grin attempted to conceal his excitement, but the gleam in his eye gave him away. I knew as I answered that my exhilaration matched his.

The following months in Atlanta led to countless hours surfing StreetEasy and the *New York Times* real estate section for apartment rentals and obscenely priced townhomes. But we would not be deterred. We could survive on rice and beans, if need be. As the anticipation grew, our silence gave way, and we confessed to our friends that we would move the following summer. We had not yet determined how to relocate Q Ideas, a nonprofit we'd founded seven years prior. Our work focused on educating Christian leaders in creative ways to engage their industries and cities. Even if we could get over that hurdle, we would still have to sell our Atlanta home in a debilitating real estate market—a process that would take two years. Yet the call to New York had grown so strong in both our hearts that running from these obstacles was not an option.

Restlessness continued to build. Some days I tried to blame the insanity of this leap on my husband, but I was also ready to jump. Something was tugging, pulling, screaming for me to make a dramatic alteration. A change that would mark the end of an era—an epoch of safety and security. I'd fought this moment for more than a year as I drove down the suburban highways and debated with myself (often out loud), looking for ways to rationalize the suppression of this urge for a change. In the end, I couldn't shake it. Something was calling, beckoning me into the unknown.

I sensed life growing shorter by the minute, and I didn't want to live with regret. Funny thing about regret: it shows up only when you know you're supposed to do something and choose not to. So, despite moments of kicking and screaming, I eventually surrendered. And once

that decision was made, all the forces of Providence moved in the direction of New York.

We figured out a way to transition our organization without ceasing operations, and our Atlanta home sold. Of course, we lost money on the sale, thanks to a flailing economy, but to quote Gabe, “What’s money when the other option is to put your life on hold?”



What began that night with friends at Barnsley Gardens as anticipation for this new adventure was overtaken by tears of pain. I wrestled in the moment with a sense of betrayal for leaving these dear ones behind. I was changing my fate, and I felt alone and uneasy. As if I were standing on the edge of the abyss of uncertainty. The tips of my toes hung over the cliff, and my body shifted forward. I was being thrust into my life’s greatest freefall thus far, yet I was leaving behind those who mattered most. *Who will catch me?* I wondered to myself. *Who will catch me when I fall?*

Perhaps these emotions aren’t only mine.

A friend told me recently that her daughter was going off to college. The young girl was full of life and possibility. This friend had mothered well. She’d taught her daughter everything she knew. Spilled out everything she had. Fighting back tears, she said, “I’m empty, and she’s full.” As my friend poured into her children, she grew more isolated from the world around her. No one was pouring back into her. Now that her child was

leaving the nest, she recognized a hollowness. Her daughter was full of life and possibilities, but my friend felt spent. Vacant.

Who will catch us when we fall?

We don't have an answer, so we stay far from the ledge. Far from the possibility of failure or pain. Because falling without a safety net terrifies us. Never mind that we are equipped with wings on our backs, rusty from disuse. Wings we've had since childhood that have been clamped down so long they aren't sure how to spring forth anymore. We fear they aren't strong enough to carry us now, so we peek over the ledge at the lush growth and waterfall below, but we wouldn't dare jump. Instead we toil responsibly at the life we've created. Far from the ledge.

As my thoughts cleared during everyone's speeches in the gardens, the tears started to dry and stain, and I gained an inner resolve. I wanted to make sure our friends understood my heart before the moment passed. I stood and shared how long this move had beckoned me. How hard I resisted. But I wasn't fighting anymore. I was following it. Surrendering to it. Walking into it. I faced an unknown, scary, irrational future. It was a midlife redirect with three children, two toy poodles, and a minivan.

From the South to the North.

From the suburbs to the city.

From margin to constraint.

Emboldened, I offered appeals to my friends to “run after the desires of your heart.” To “never live a life of comfort because that only leads to death.” Blah, blah, blah. Perhaps I secretly hoped someone else would stand up and yell, “I’m in!” Instead, their soft stares only empathized with the weight of this decision. Perhaps they knew that trepidation crouched behind my bold words. I was terrified.

After a series of long hugs, Gabe and I drove home. The passing streetlights threatened to lull my emotionally drained body to sleep.

Who will catch me? I wondered again. My safety net severed, I descended into the unknown. But perhaps this was a gift in disguise.

After all, sometimes we need a freefall to teach us how to fly.

CHAPTER 1

*Midtown
Daydreams*

“Life is never made unbearable by circumstances,
but only by lack of meaning and purpose.”

VIKTOR FRANKL



OUR MANHATTAN APARTMENT looked more like a war zone than a home. Cheerios dotted the floor downstairs next to a conspicuous pool of milk. Couch pillows were strewn on the rug; shoes nestled between couch cushions. Unopened cardboard moving boxes marked “Fragile” were stacked high. And I—well, I was upstairs crawling back under the sheets for a moment alone. With the door propped open to listen in on my children downstairs, I rested in solitude.

The digital clock glowed 9:13 a.m. as sunlight peeked through the cracks of blinds drawn tight. Three children chattered downstairs. Lord knows what they were getting into. *Good Luck Charlie* lasts only twenty-eight minutes, so my default electronic babysitter would soon be off duty. And there I was. Alone. Surrounded by more than eight million strangers just beyond the 140-year-old walls. The isolation I feared would set in at that farewell evening weeks ago at Barnsley Gardens had come on fast and strong.

Sleep evaded me as my morning coffee kicked in. I let out a deep sigh, and my mind wandered, spinning like the ceiling fan that held my gaze overhead. As the day's mental task list faded, the daydreams flooded in. I was transported back to days of living wild and free.

A young girl spinning round and round, trying not to lose my balance. My earliest memory, set in Lawton, Oklahoma. Four-year-old eyes stared straight overhead, blinking in wonder as the snowflakes swirled like dancing fairies, kissing my cheeks as they descended with their electric touch.

I asked my dad to build a snowman with me, and after some begging, he relented. I ran inside to prepare. My mom tugged not one but two pairs of my pants on top of each other. Together we squeezed on layers of socks and shoes and shoved a pair of white rubber boots over everything else, secured with an elastic band wrapped around a periwinkle button. A plaid coat, navy gloves, and headgear completed the outfit. I was ready to face the snowy wilderness, though I couldn't raise my arms and was barely able to move.

I waddled next to my dad in our front yard late into the dusk, rolling snowballs bigger and bigger until our snowman stood tall. Dad and I stepped back to survey our work. Proud. A true team. If only we had some magic dust to bring our distinguished gentleman to life. Then this moonlit snowscape would be perfect.

When our family moved to Florida, we traded winter snowstorms for sweltering summers. By fourth grade I'd grown into an avid bookworm,

even earning the family nickname Beka-Book because my nose was always buried in pages. Each day after school, I retrieved a new Nancy Drew book from the library. I loved Nancy. A fearless detective. My competitive spirit would try to solve the mystery before she did. I also fancied Ned. I would skim ahead, looking for scenes where Ned and Nancy might fall in love. They kept it more professional than I preferred. Many late afternoons, I waited for my mother, a teacher, to finish her work. Books provided escape from the dreariness of a school emptied of friends. These hardcovers followed me home, too. We didn't have a TV until I was in middle school, so I spent my formative years escaping into stories printed on a page.

Once the school year was over, my siblings and I kept the St. Petersburg Public Library in business. Actually, not really, since we weren't paying based on the number of books checked out. We returned weekly to fill cloth sacks with as many volumes as our backs could sustain. Bursting into our kitchen, I'd dump a pile of books on the table and determine the first one to crack open.

One summer I entered a contest at the library to guess how many jelly beans were in a large glass jar sitting in the entryway of the children's section. Brilliant. Lure the kids in with candy and competition. The winner received a collection of his or her favorite books and a fancy dinner out with the family (and, of course, the entire jar of jelly beans). Turns out, I won. I was giddy with delight at my first competitive victory as I scooped up my loot: a pile of Encyclopedia Brown books—the ones

where you try to solve the mystery on your own and then verify your guess in the back of the book.

The grand prize didn't stop there. My family of five was treated to a fancy candlelit dinner beneath the Golden Arches. That's right—a table covered with linens and china . . . and Big Macs, Filet-O-Fish sandwiches, french fries, and hot fudge sundaes. We ordered anything we wanted from a menu brought to us by a friendly server. Quite a contrast from our usual Sunday-night splurge for twenty-five-cent ice-cream cones. Our family was stuffed and happy, thanks to my expert guessing skills. I still have a picture of us sitting together at dinner. That was a shining moment, one that confirmed my choice hobby had been a good one.

Looking back, my infatuation with reading was probably the first clue to my calling. Books brought me life. Stories were portals to other worlds. Had anyone told me that one day I might pen one myself, my heart would have leaped from my chest. But I didn't recognize that inclination as something deeper. And neither did those around me. I never considered exploring the possibility of writing the types of stories I was reading. When I turned thirty-three, my mom commented while pushing my son on a swing at the playground, "I'd always thought you'd write." She spoke the words nonchalantly as if these passions and gifts had been apparent all along, but I had never heard them before. Childhood delight becoming an adult profession seems out of grasp for most of us while we're growing up.

I never made the connection. Until I left home.



I attended a liberal arts college in Virginia fifteen hours away. I met my match in my would-be husband there just as my sense of purpose surfaced. On a late-night date, we scribbled our passions and dreams on paper napkins at Billy Joe's ice-cream parlor. Hints of something more beckoned us even then. We shared an urge toward something greater that never quite subsided. An elusive longing, anchored in our faith, to make a difference in the world. We didn't have a clue how, but our pulses quickened when we shared our hearts with others. Like minded, Gabe and I were doing our best with the tools we'd been given. Holding a deep-rooted conviction that we should dream big, we began our journey. But would we be willing to jump on that terrifying ride?

When we moved to Georgia after getting married, I grew comfortable in my skin. Gabe found an ambitious job marketing national events that equipped leaders, and I landed my dream job at North Point Community Church. Our napkin dreams seemed to be materializing. Maybe we had both found our niches.

Then life happened.

Our first son, Cade—now the oldest of three—was born with Down syndrome. My doll baby. He never really cried. We played dress up, and he tolerated it with a gooey grin. But within months, his physical, speech,

and occupational therapies increased to eight hours per week. I confessed to my boss that I was failing on both ends. As a team player and as a mom, I needed to dive deep into the role only I could fill.

So home I went, to long days in a house swollen with silence. Days full of light and despair. How do both emotions coexist?

Despair from a fantasy undone of a blond boy singing and chatting with me from the backseat. *Light* from the long tears shed and comforted when faith became mandatory.

I sat with my girlfriends in a circle on the floor as we watched our kids crawl all over us and each other—grabbing toys, slapping each other, and planting snotty kisses. We compared notes on plastic nipples, real-life nipples, and what constitutes GERD. As the months flew by, I watched the other babies turn into crawling, teetering toddlers. But for my little Cade and me, time stood still. He would hang in my lap or inch nearby while the others wobbled after each other around the room or were told “no touch” by their mommies.

When it came time to leave, I’d nearly barrel over those toddlers in my mad dash for the car to strap Cade into his car seat. The ride that followed was my escape from reality. I would blare whatever song moved me on the car stereo and cry for reasons I couldn’t put words to at the time. I knew Cade and I would always have each other. We would keep each other broken and whole at the same time.

The afternoon before his first birthday, Cade napped as I methodically iced a huge lion face on a cake, made from scratch and complete with piped ribbons reflecting sugary oranges and browns. Armed with mad decorating skills I'd learned in a baking class years earlier, my steady hands crafted matching cupcakes.

Everything needs to be perfect. Look perfect. Taste perfect.

The same way I want Cade to be perfect.

Tears welled, and my eyelids gave way as a drop landed on the counter. Another and then another until saline crushed the dam of my resolve. Hot tears surged for more than an hour. My human attempt to find perfection. How was I still missing it? When would this pain subside? When would I be whole again? When would I shed the guilt I harbored for asking these questions and the crippling numbness when God didn't seem to answer?

I told a friend one day we were praying for Cade to be "whole." She responded, "Maybe your version of wholeness and God's version of wholeness look different." Reeling. *What does she know? She doesn't even have babies yet.*

A decade later. She was right.

My hang-up with wholeness was my issue, not Cade's. Not God's. In all the conversations during my first year as a mom, that is the only one I remember. But I wouldn't embrace it for years to come.

Perhaps that's why I kept Mead notebooks chock full of lists. Oh, the lists. They turned into volumes. When I was up all night with a newborn, they said things like "Wash hair" and "Buy food." Days turned into weeks as I found my groove (and some sleep), and my tasks turned into lofty things like "Drive car through the car wash," "Pay someone else to paint my nails," and "Slap some baby pictures in a book with a glue stick." Crazy went full throttle when they said, "Mail Christmas photo cards with pretend candid awkward pose," "Try out Zumba," and "Make pantry look pretty."

Each item I added made me feel as though I had purpose.

The longer the list, the greater the purpose. I became a rote, hollow version of my once-creative self. Success was measured by accomplishments each day. I went through mental gymnastics in bed each night, compulsively adding new things to my list. Tasking was my way of healing. But it was a lie. More like my distraction from grieving. My ability to keep things under control.

As my fears of being a mediocre parent grew, my napkin dreams seemed to mock me. What more was I expecting? Roles of leadership I'd held in high school and college and my earlier jobs were now distant memories. The paradox between a young heart bulging with anticipation and the current days counting down to bedtime was more than I was able to bear. Delirious with exhaustion, I felt guilty for not loving the moments more. Each and every one. I grieved for not loving the messiness more. Try as I might, I could not manipulate those shining moments any more than I could pretend to cherish them.

Guilt, guilt, guilt.

Over time, the lists started losing their savor. They became less frequent. Days would sneak by without a glance. Tasking turned to turmoil. *Am I living the life I always imagined? Is this what the rest of my days are destined to look like? Will I always be forced to abandon hope for duty?*



My head snapped up from the pillow at the sound of my daughter calling my name from downstairs. *Good Luck Charlie* had ended, and my job needed to start again. More than fifteen years removed from my napkin dreams, I was running fast. I'd been given a front-row seat on a rickety wooden roller coaster motoring on a never-ending loop. Twisting, turning, backward, forward. Straining to find my bearings, but never slowing enough to compose myself. Going in circles, but never finding my dreams.

If we ignore the yearnings of our souls, we atrophy, and our dreams die. Sadly, many of us choose this descent because we believe it's safer. If we don't hope, we won't be let down. If we don't imagine, reality won't disappoint. Either way, we avoid pain.

These destructive tendencies seem to afflict women in particular. Since 1988, the use of antidepressant drugs has soared nearly 400 percent, and women are 2.5 times more likely than men to take them. Twenty-three percent of women ages forty to fifty-nine regularly take these drugs, more than in any other demographic.¹

Nearly one in four. A devastating statistic. Why the struggle? Why the heaviness?

As for me, I wondered, *Is this just seasonal depression? Or will it linger?* My faith was flailing. The gloom lifted by spring, but the lurking shadow reminded me that January would come again. I think perhaps the anticipation of the darkness returning was as precarious as when it settled.

A friend recently confessed through tears that she struggles with bitterness. Her life doesn't look the way she'd hoped it would. She couldn't reconcile how her life—looking so successful on the surface—disguised the aching void that brings her tears the moment she opens her balled fists.

Are we grieving because our lives don't look the way we imagined in our youth?

Do we pressure our children to reach their potential because we aren't living up to our own?

Are we spending every moment cultivating the lives of everyone . . . but ourselves?

Women are stars fading behind the dark shadow of those we care for, and we often look a little worse for wear. Our light is dimmer than it used to be as we find ourselves unable to dream beyond our current reality.

So we compromise. *My childhood dreams were just that—dreams. I should let them go.* We push down any hope when we sense it emerging. The desire for change uncovers what terrifies us most: failure.

Then we go numb. We tell ourselves a quick fix will do just fine. Whatever will keep our heads above water—whatever will allow us to keep making lunches, paying the bills, getting through sex, doing the kids’ carpool, working out, pursuing that career, and so on—will just have to do. We don’t want to become the crazy lady at the bus stop, so we think to ourselves, *Just give me the shortcut. Then I’ll be okay.*

Perhaps most alarming are the many women who don’t see past their manicured lives—grasping for society’s definition of being “put together.” We have pretty ways of masking our lack of meaning, using all kinds of beauty products and retail therapy. We have homes to furnish and decorate, then redecorate once we tire of what we have. We keep up with fashion styles, throw and attend parties, and maintain a rigorous pace. While these are all delightful and beautiful and often worthy goals, using them to conceal our unfulfilled lives is dangerous.

Some women uncover their talents before having kids and then shelve them while raising their children. They’ve experienced a sense of fulfillment in living out their purpose but believe they must set aside their pursuits for the sake of motherhood. They’ve bought into the belief that their gifts and child rearing are disparate parts, unable to coexist. Instead of fighting to figure out the balance, they stuff their dreams in a box marked “Motherhood.”

Other women never identify their purpose before having children. Parenthood sets in and can unknowingly become the excuse to stop cultivating their dreams. Instead, they place their quest for significance

on the lives of their children (as we see played out on Facebook every day). But this suffocating pressure is too much for anyone to bear, much less a five-year-old.

In either case, the displacement of a mother's purpose (beyond child rearing) becomes a huge loss to our communities. If women aren't empowered to cultivate their uniqueness, we all suffer the loss of beauty, creativity, and resourcefulness they were meant to inject into the world.

Can a mother chase the dreams that stir her heart and simultaneously raise her children?

Can a woman chase the dreams that stir her heart when life gets in the way?

The masks need not remain. The fading is teaching us to turn from trying to prove to each other that we have everything together to letting our wounds show. We speak words that ring out in the air and just sit there. Moments of sharing and pain and desperation. Desperation to be heard, to be understood, and to know we are still in this life together. The years give us new perspective and freedom to be honest. In these settings, an echo keeps surfacing. Struggle, responsibility, pain, and in the midst of it all, faith.

Aging is paradoxical: the older we get, the less we are sure of. All we hope for is the courage to keep walking. And our understanding of God's grace takes new shape for us. Our hearts stumble into unknown territory as our lives twist and turn. Yet we aren't sure how to respond.

We thought we had faith figured out before, when life was a negative in black and white. But now that we see in full color, the image has faded. Clarity left long ago when we were held in the tension between seeing how things *ought* to be in contrast with how they really *are*. We freefall because we never figured out what makes us fly.

We stopped dreaming.

I'm riveted by the scene in *The King's Speech* when Prince Albert, Duke of York, delivers a discourse to a large crowd on a dreary London day in 1930. He stutters conspicuously, and the crowd squirms in their seats. Out of desperation to defend her husband's reputation, the Duchess of York travels to a dilapidated part of town to locate Lionel Logue, a speech therapist. He has Bertie (his affectionate nickname for Albert) wear headphones and listen to blaring classical music while reading Shakespeare's well-known soliloquy from Hamlet. Lionel records Bertie's voice as he stutters through the famous first phrase—"To be or not to be"—but Bertie's final frustration drives him out of the room, recording in hand, shouting, "What's the use?"

Bertie hides the vinyl recording in his desk drawer. Just out of reach. But he knows it's still there. After a week passes, Bertie pulls out the record and listens. As his smooth, liberated speech echoes out of the speaker, he is dumbfounded, amazed by the gift he possesses. He hears words of conviction soaring without stutter. Beautiful like music. His wife bears witness. An epiphany. They promptly return to Lionel in secret to continue working.²

Hope is springing forth.

Too often we live with our talents hidden in the desk drawer. Just out of reach. We've tucked them away. Refusing to listen. It hurts too much to hope. So we go on with our lives, not allowing ourselves to go near that drawer.

“We arrive in this world with birthright gifts—then we spend the first half of our lives abandoning them or letting others disabuse us of them,” Parker Palmer writes in *Let Your Life Speak*. “Then—if we are awake, aware, and able to admit our loss—we spend the second half trying to recover and reclaim the gift we once possessed.”³

Not long ago I was burdened to share this truth about embracing our gifts with my eight-year-old son, Pierce. I recounted the parable Jesus told in the Gospel of Matthew about a businessman who takes a trip. Before leaving, he gives “talents,” or money, to each of his three servants. One servant receives five talents; the second, two; and the third, one, according to their respective abilities. After a long absence, the businessman returns to find that the first two have invested and doubled the value of their talents. The businessman is well pleased. The third servant, however, buried his talent in the ground. A wasted opportunity. The businessman is upset that his servant would do such a thing, and he gives those talents to one of the others.

Pierce's attention was gripped for a much longer span than usual. I asked him what he thought his talents were. He came up with five, of course,

out of his desire to be like the most admired servant. Singing, drawing, building LEGO towers, playing the guitar, and climbing (preferably rock walls or trees in Central Park).

We decided to draw illustrations of each of these talents and put them on his bulletin board in his bedroom as a reminder that we would commit this eighth year of his life to “investing” in each. Through lessons or focus or skinning up knees, this year would be one for developing those gifts.

A few days after hanging up these illustrations, we spent the holidays with Meeme and Papa (Gabe’s parents). With the children gathered around, the grandparents shared stories from decades long past.

Papa shared about his childhood love for art and how he’d earned a scholarship to a specialized art school as a teenager but turned it down. This was news to all of us. Knowing Gabe’s love for sketching and Pierce’s affinity for drawing ever since he was three, I started connecting the dots as to where these gifts had originated.

Pierce asked Papa why he hadn’t attended art school, and Papa responded vaguely: it just wasn’t something he would have considered at the time. Times were different then. Families needed feeding, wars needed fighting, and ends needed meeting. Difficult decisions often had to be made based on pragmatism. Papa was raised in a log cabin in the hills of Nelson County, Virginia. He served in the Army during the Vietnam War, found God, and worked for forty years as a welder to provide for a wife and two amazing sons. He rose at 4:00 a.m. for the morning

shift every two weeks and worked the night shift until midnight on the others, sacrificing much to provide both his sons a college education.

Pierce, with eight-year-old innocence, asked, “So you buried it, huh?”

Papa looked up, surprised by the pointed honesty of his grandson’s question. With a softness in his eyes, he graciously responded, “Well, I guess I did.”



Another day was about to begin. Cascading down the wooden stairs, I placed one foot in front of the other, which was really all I’d been doing my adult life up to this point. Celiac testing for Cade, barium swallow studies for Pierce, midnight bouts with croup, six crowns in Pierce’s baby teeth from chronic reflux.

There were celebrations, too—concocting dinners from food hand-picked from the farmer’s market, planning memory-filled vacations. And, of course, Cade’s first steps at three and his first time pooping on the potty at age six. No more scrubbing the sheets every other day. These shining moments trained me to keep walking forward.

Yet I wanted to do more than just walk forward. My heart yearned to lunge, to skip, then to sprint into a life of meaning. To uncover those talents—now waking tremors from childhood and college and yesterday—that life had buried in a shallow grave. To pull the record out of my desk drawer and play it for all to hear. To hope again.