

CHAPTER THREE



A DEEP BREATH

The Power of Patience

by Catherine Arveseth



Five children in four years, including two sets of twins, was a surprising life twist for Catherine after wading through years of infertility. Taking care of so many small children has been a challenge, but she and her husband, Doug, see their family explosion as an absolute miracle, a dream come true.

Catherine is the oldest of six children and lauds her parents for teaching her the importance of hard work and family. Two things that seem inseparable. She has a degree in Exercise Physiology, a minor in Creative Writing, is part of Segullah's Prose Editorial Board, and writes for Meridian Magazine.

She finds a busy family life most rewarding when she focuses on building relationships, laughing easily, cultivating gratitude, and choosing joy. Motherhood has turned her into a night owl, simply to preserve a sense of self and sanity (and keep the laundry moving). When not washing something or someone, she loves running the local canyon, reading, writing, and makes a mean dish of home-made mac and cheese. She lives in Salt Lake City and blogs at wildnprecious.com.

A thin light limps through the kitchen window. I lean over the sink, searching for the sun as it flickers in and out of a hazed and swollen sky.

Tired, but determined to make a real dinner for my family, I bend over the counter and knead a sticky ball of dough. My boys are hungry—I can hear it in their cries. Spencer toddles into the kitchen, throws his arms around my leg, and wails into my pants. Gordon yanks on my apron ties and whimpers softly.

I sigh and keep kneading. If I were Elastigirl I could stand right here and reach that baking sheet in the cupboard over there. But I'm not, so I lurch across the kitchen with Spencer slung round my leg like a koala bear and Gordon impatiently cracking the reins to his newfound pony. I retrieve the baking sheet only to turn around and bump into Gordon who falls flat on his back. He hollers loud as I ease him onto my shoulder and whisper, "I'm sorry."

I call for my girls. No answer. I call louder and then raise a suspicious eyebrow.

We have five children five and under: a five-year-old daughter, three-year-old twin girls, and one-year-old twin boys. Any mother can imagine the state of glorified chaos that reigns under our roof. Life is wild and busy; unpredictable but precious. Sometimes the bounty of it is so abundant I want to stretch the moment long, cup the joy tight. Other times I want to hand over my apron and make a run for it—anywhere. The evening hours are the hardest. My patience wears thin, little ones rumble restless and almost anything can happen.

With an awkward lift, I hoist Spencer onto my other hip and set off to find the girls. They are in the playroom swapping princess shoes and arguing over purses. I'm not in the mood to mediate conflict, so I leave them to their own peace-making skills, set the boys down with some matchbox cars, and return to the kitchen to finish dinner. Lifting the lid of the crock-pot, I check the carrots to make sure they're soft. They're not. And neither is the celery. Apparently, the low setting wasn't adequate and my soup has done nothing but mull for the last four hours. I scan the refrigerator for plan B, but my husband has been working late nights and these days, getting to the grocery store is like getting to the moon for me. We're pretty much out of food.

I open two boxes of macaroni and cheese and put some water on to boil.

Suddenly, a little warning bell goes off in my head. Check on the boys. I hustle downstairs. No boys. But I hear chortles and splashing coming from down the hall. I know exactly where they are. Someone forgot to close the bathroom door and they are crowded around the toilet. Gordon is plunging a Care Bear into the bowl while Spencer scoops handfuls of yellow water into his mouth. Not only did someone forget to close the door, they forgot to flush. I am horrified and both boys are completely soaked.

After stripping down the boys and cleaning up the mess, I am greeted at the top of the stairs by a lovely web of pink and purple ribbon strung from doorknob to doorknob. Two spools of my best ribbon have been spun out to the cardboard. I follow the trail to the couch and peer over the edge to find three girls huddled in a corner, each with a pair of scissors, snipping ribbon into confetti that now litters the living room floor.

“Really? This is my life?” I say out loud. The girls’ eyes grow wide and the scissors stop.

I’m about to unleash a fireball of verbal frustration that has been building, and then I pause.

Deep breath. Walk away for a minute. You can handle this. . . .

Patience Defined

After our first set of twins was born I found myself saying, “I used to be a patient person. I used to be nice. I was calm, collected, and patient. What happened to me?”

Well, the reality is, I had kids. Let me explain.

Wikipedia defines patience as “the state of endurance under difficult circumstances, which can mean persevering in the face of delay or provocation without acting on annoyance/anger in a negative way; exhibiting forbearance when under strain, especially when faced with longer-term difficulties.”

Those words most definitely describe the series of events above. I was delayed, provoked, annoyed, angered, and under strain. Before children, very few things provoked me. Sure, there was the traffic of Northern Virginia, the pressures of full-time work, our long struggle with infertility. But nothing compared to this.

Nothing compared to the maniacal mix of two inconsolable babies, not enough hands, four in diapers, endless potty messes, a box of saltines scattered indiscriminately around the house, lotion-lathered hair, “swimming” on the kitchen table (a recent favorite), entire rolls of toilet paper shredded behind closed doors, the laundry room “spot-treated” by two trigger happy twins, and running late because I have five free-spirited children to wrangle into car seats.

Motherhood parachuted me right into the middle of a patience proving ground, and sometimes it feels like a war zone.

Cato defined patience as the greatest of all virtues and for good reason. Until we come face to face with circumstances that challenge our patience, it remains untried, untested, and under-developed. Patience is a process. It is discovered as we use it, much like a muscle. Overloading a muscle will stimulate the adaptive

processes of the body. Just as that muscle will eventually be able to cope with the new demands placed on it, we too will find ways to cope with certain life situations, but not until the load presents itself. The defining question, however, is, “How will we cope?”

Several months ago I saw this quote on my friend’s refrigerator:

“Peace - It does not mean to be in a place where there is no noise, trouble, or hard work. It means to be in the midst of these things and still be calm in your heart.”
- Unknown

I decided then that I wanted that kind of peace. It may not be an isolated beach on Maui with a glass of mango juice and my favorite book. Those things would be nice, but I needed something now, some kind of eye in the storm—a way to be “calm in my heart” amid the chaos.

I knew patience was key.

Patience doesn’t simply appear when we need it. It must be cultivated. I have learned a lot about myself (good and bad) since being pushed out of the chopper and dropped into the war zone. I’ve done some experimenting with patience, and here is what I’ve learned.

Give in Without Giving Up

Accepting that things are going to be hard is the first step. Adjusting mentally to a new plan, rather than feeling frustrated that things aren’t easier, is the best way to begin.

“Always fall in with what you’re asked to accept. Take what is given, and make it over your way. My aim in life has always been to hold my own with whatever’s going. Not against: with.” - Robert Frost

At some point or another, all of us will be required to accept something hard.

I have a friend whose husband is deployed overseas for months, sometimes a year, at a time. I have another friend who has four sons and recently went through a crushing divorce, which required her to return to work and move out of a home she loved. I know a mother who struggles to get up each morning and make her children breakfast because the pain of a stillbirth burns in her womb. I’ve seen the anxiety both husband and wife have felt after losing their source of income. I’ve watched families grieve the loss of a child or spouse, while others care for children with special needs—needs that require increased attention, doctors’ visits, special therapists or schools.

Life doles out circumstances that not only make for difficult moments and days, but difficult years. Moving with what has been handed us, rather than against it, is the mark of graceful living—especially when faced with long-term challenges.

Somehow, just giving in to our fast and furious family life has helped me feel more patient with myself and others. It doesn't mean throwing in the towel and crying in a corner, tempting as that is some days. It means re-evaluating and adjusting my expectations so that they are reasonable.

After our boys were born, I lived most days in my pajamas only to realize at bedtime that I hadn't even brushed my teeth! My expectations were minimal: feed my children and feed myself.

Acceptance means finding a positive way to cope with the load we have to shoulder. It means acknowledging (but not dwelling on) the fact that the future is going to be difficult. It is knowing what Robert Frost knew. We can “make it over [our] way.”

Know Your Triggers

When I lose patience, I feel bothered and defeated—like circumstance teamed up with my lesser self and won. So I've been trying to recognize why and when I feel impatient.

The process has been revealing. There are times of day I am more likely to unravel—certain situations or personal states of being that find me functioning with a shorter fuse.

Some triggers I can control. Others I can't. I can go to bed earlier. I can make sure I eat when my children eat. I can build larger margins into our schedule so we can get places on time. I can work on being more patient during the evening hours when I'm tired and going it alone. I may have to call on some deep reserves, but I can do it. Recognizing, anticipating and working to minimize triggers has set me up for more successful moments.

No day (or mother) is perfect, but self-assessment can help us improve.

Slow Down

Being in a hurry is my most potent trigger. One Sunday morning, while racing around the house like I was trying to win the Indianapolis 500 so we could get to church on time, my oldest daughter said to me, “Mom! We're just kids!”

Sometimes I expect my children to put their things away as quickly as I can, come upstairs as fast as I would, change their clothes in the same time I change mine.

But the truth is, kid-time is slower than parent-time. And we ought to cut them some slack.

In an age when everything is instant—from communication and meals to ordering anything you want with a single click, no one is used to waiting—including me. Waiting has become a lost art. And teaching this to our children is most effective when they see it first in us.

In their book, *365 Ways to Raise Confident Kids*, Sheila Ellison and Barbara Barnett describe patience as “a deep breath that slows us down long enough to act wisely.”

One breath can slow us down, redirect us and open the door for wisdom to walk in.

A Christian writer and mother of six, tells herself,

“I will not have any emergencies today. Life is not an emergency. There are no emergencies. Only amateurs hurry.” - Ann Voskamp

I repeat this mantra often.

Several weeks ago the girls had no school. We had no lessons, no playgroups, no appointments, and I made the decision—no errands. We would stay home. We would put everything off that wasn't necessary and just be. In the early morning, I cracked doors to see if anyone was stirring. Curls fell softly around faces, small bodies burrowed under blankets, and I watched as they slept. I climbed onto the couch with a book and let them sleep until they wandered into the living room clutching blankets and smiling bashful. I hugged each girl then gathered the boys out of their cribs and we nestled onto the couch to read until we were hungry.

We made pancakes, poured the syrup thick, and sat together at the table, laughing. I wasn't lacing little shoes in between spoonfuls of cereal. I was present. Fully. And it felt so good.

We made plans for the day to stay in our pajamas for a while, do puzzles, play games, and then bundle into winter clothes so we could build something out of the snow in our backyard.

I held the boys longer than usual when putting them down for naps. I whispered in their ears, sang songs, and breathed in their baby scent—aware of their lengthening bodies and the way Spencer tenderly draped his arm around my neck. I washed dishes and watched out the window as the girls packed and rolled snow. They came in and out hunting for various accessories as three small snowmen took shape. When they finally came in to stay, we made hot chocolate.

The day was unusually peaceful, and I felt happy. The sun warmed my back as we built towers out of blocks in the living room. I saw things I am usually too hurried to notice, like the conversation my girls had when Sami gave up her favorite chair for her sister, the way Eliza told Ali her painting was “lovely,” and the swiftness with which all of them moved to comfort a brother who fell, or needed a pacifier.

Instead of pleading “just a minute,” I took Gordy’s hand when he said “Mama!” and let him lead me to his pile of Legos so we could play. I laughed at Spencer’s animal sounds and the way he giggled when Gordon poked his belly.

Sami joined me that night in the boys’ bedroom. She sang them her own lullaby, and each girl kissed their baby brothers goodnight.

As I loaded dinner plates into the dishwasher, Ali perched on the kitchen table per her usual place and called my name.

“Mom?”

“Yes?” I turned to face her.

“I love you,” she said.

An unusual sentiment for her and it split me wide open.

When will I stop racing through life? There is too much here. Too much to feel . . . see . . . listen to . . . and love. Life is made of moments. And there will never be another now.

I know we can’t always amble through life. Down-time is not the norm. The typical day requires sticking to a schedule, a routine, and it’s a challenge to get everyone where they need to be on time. But we can pace ourselves. We don’t have to do everything the neighbors’ kids are doing. We don’t have to rush. We can decide on the right balance for our family and ourselves. We can quit looking sideways and look within.

Look Before You Lose It

While I was getting out of the shower one morning, the bathroom door opened, and my five-year-old poked her head inside to ask for a cookie sheet. “A cookie sheet?” I asked.

“Yeah . . . don’t look mom . . . but we’re making cookies for you. It’s a surprise!”

My kids are usually asleep this time of morning, but not today. My girls were sitting atop the kitchen table making peanut butter cookies. Flour, peanut butter, and water were mashed into a glass bowl. The rolling pin was in full use, clumps

of flour sprinkled the kitchen floor, and all three of my girls looked like little cotton balls for the flour on their pajamas and faces. Eliza had to be ready for school in a half hour and I now had an enormous mess to clean up.

Before I could say a word, the explanations came spilling out. “This was what we were whispering about yesterday Mom! This is our surprise! We wanted to get up in the middle of the night to make them, but . . . (tilting her head with a little question mark on her face), we didn’t wake up!” Thank goodness, I thought.

I had been working on this tactic—the ability to look before losing it. So I gathered them around and thanked them for wanting to make cookies. I told them it was a sweet idea, but right now we needed to clean up the mess and get ready for school. I would help them make cookies another day, with all the right ingredients.

How could I be perturbed considering their intent?

As I vacuumed the kitchen floor, Eliza said to me, “Mom. I’m sorry. We probably should have asked you, huh?” She figured it out herself. No feelings were hurt, all relationships remained intact, and we moved on.

In every first-aid or CPR class, the first thing responders are taught to do is “survey the scene to make sure it is safe.”

Checking the scene gives us time to examine what has really gone on, to ask questions, and determine intent. It helps us better understand the offender and the offended. We don’t want to jump in too quickly and create another victim. We want to offer aid when the scene (and we) are safe enough to intervene. It also helps us see what is happening in our children’s heads and hearts.

A few months ago, I set a consequence for my girls that exceeded the crime. I was hanging onto the day by my fingernails and as a last ditch effort, took away some privileges that hit hard. The punishment was more severe than it needed to be, and when Eliza was finally allowed out of time-out (privileges still not restored), she drew a picture for me that we now have posted in our kitchen. It’s a crayon drawing of a bright red heart with blue background. In black letters she wrote at the bottom, “Feel the Love.”

She was soliciting me for mercy, empathy, and love.

Looking before we lose it will help us discipline more fairly, laugh more easily, and, as taught to me by a five-year-old, “feel the love.”

Set the Tone

Some days I fear the kitchen window will be open and my neighbors will hear “the real me” yelling at my kids. I don’t think it’s possible to always keep our wits about us and never raise our voices. But I do think it’s worth trying.

I’ve noticed a pattern. When I raise my voice, my anger actually heightens. I get more worked up, and sometimes without warrant. A physiological response is set in motion.

Dr. David Hamilton, a clinical psychologist at the Christian Counseling Center of West Michigan says, “I suspect that if we hooked up equipment to measure our physiological response [when we yell], we would see a response similar to what we have when someone else yells at us.”

He continues, “Yes, we can motivate people by yelling at them. (How else would we explain the existence of Little League?) It does motivate people to do something, but it may not be their best. It may motivate them to hide. It may motivate them to do what it takes to get us to stop yelling. If our goal is to help cultivate a lasting and positive change in someone, we don't want to start with showing them that we are out of control ourselves. Remember that no matter what the words are that come out, the message of yelling is, ‘Please, someone calm me down because I can't calm myself down.’”

Learning to manage our voice is a matter of self-discipline. One mother I know describes anger as “lazy parenting.” And I believe she’s right. There is a better way. When I use a calm voice (it doesn’t have to be sweet, it can be stern), the rest of me follows, and I act more rationally. Patience actually seems to breed patience.

Recently, my oldest berated her sisters because they didn’t want to put on a “parade” with her. It was time to get ready for bed, her little sisters were preoccupied with books, and she was distraught over their disinterest. Her yelling probably merited a time-out, but I thought I would try something different. Instead, I asked her to come with me. “You’ll feel better if you come with me,” I said.

We went downstairs to her bedroom, and I helped her change into her pajamas, all the while talking gently with her about choices and “going with the flow” (a new phrase I tried to explain to her). I told her the parade idea was an excellent one, but she couldn’t make her sisters join her. She could invite, but if they said no, she had to respect their decision. Maybe she could put her idea on the shelf for the night and try again tomorrow. We talked side by side on her bed, my arm around her shoulder, until her sisters came down to see what was happening. She

hopped off the bed and said, “Guys. I learned my lesson. Would you like to do the parade another day?” They said yes.

Words matter. How we speak determines the tone of our home. Our children are made up of what we say and patience slows us down long enough to not only act wisely, but speak wisely—to be gentle with their hearts.

“The moment I am most repelled by a child’s behavior, is my sign that I need to draw closest to that child.” - Ann Voskamp

I am learning in life that those who need our love most, usually deserve it the least.

Dig Deep

I always wanted to be a mother. We struggled for many years to have children, and when they finally came, for some reason, God sent them all at once. But I am starting to see the wisdom in it—the beauty of all these children smooshed together. They are close, they have playmates, and they are learning to share and to wait. They are going to be better for it.

And so am I. Having five children in four years has been the hardest thing I’ve done. Nothing equals the exhaustion I’ve felt. Nothing has tried my patience and pushed me to the limit like being in charge of five very needy little people. But over time, I can see the snail-like progression of my soul.

On the most difficult days, I try to find those reserves that will help me do something or be something I think I can’t. Kimberly Peterson, a Power of Moms writer describes it as “advanced parenting skills, a calmness that takes effect like a back up generator when the power goes out.”

Mark Elliot Sacks said, “When everyone around you says you can’t. When everything you know says you can’t. When everything within you says you can’t. Dig deeper within yourself and you find that you can.”

The human spirit is remarkable.

Patience is like a well of power inside us. Each time we choose to accept what’s been given, to slow down, to say no to something that will overextend us, to live in the mess, to lower our voices, or to laugh when we want to cry, the water in our well rises. When we give into the stress of the moment and lose our cool, we find ourselves parched, empty, and drained. Small victories add up over time, filling the well, rather than spilling its contents.

Last night I stood in the doorway of our living room and watched the thrum of our house—the hum of living that comes with five children. The kitchen sink

was full of dishes. Goldfish crackers were crumbled into the carpet. Puzzles, books and building blocks scattered the floor, but my girls were dancing—wild and free—a flurry of limbs and laughter. A favorite song tripped a happy rhythm from the stereo, and I mused as both boys kicked and snapped their legs in an attempt to hoist themselves onto the coffee table. When they finally stood triumphant, they looked toward me at the same second and smiled, just to make sure I was watching. I clapped, blew them a kiss, and then leaned long against the doorframe.

Moments. That's all we have.

And I let the peace of this one warm me straight through.

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Feeding the Ducks

When I was a young mother with three children under the age of two, we lived in a one-bedroom apartment. I had just cleaned the apartment when I walked out of the bathroom to find Cheerios strewn all over my newly vacuumed carpet.

My two-year-old boy looked up at me, then deliberately reached his tiny hand into the Cheerios box, and proceeded to fling handfuls of Cheerios across the floor.

I lost it. I started ranting and raving about having just cleaned and how they weren't supposed to throw food onto the floor. I sat all three on chairs (they all seemed to be guilty), then spanked their bottoms for good measure. I must have let off steam for a good four minutes with them staring at me in amazement and confusion before I finally yelled, "Why? Why would you do this?"

Garrett, my two-year-old, answered, "I is feeding de ducks."

I proceeded to yell about that comment for another two minutes until I came to my next question. "Why? We don't even have any ducks!" Whereupon Garrett replied calmly, "They is ducks." I looked over to where my two little girls sat waiting patiently. Cali pulled her thumb out of her mouth and echoed Garrett's sentiments. "Uh-huh. I a duck and she a duck!"

Suddenly I could see how silly I looked to them. There was a logical explanation as to why they did what they did (in their minds at least), and I acted before asking them why. I've since learned to ask what's happening before I proceed with my disciplining. Sometimes it gives me enough pause to calm down that extra bit so I teach instead of yell.

- **Sharla Olsen**

Looking Back

I wish there were a way to take the wisdom of tomorrow and put it into action today.

Recently, my daughter and I were watching a video from a couple years ago when she was two years old. As we watched, I was struck by how beautiful she was—and how uptight I seemed to be! I listened as she pronounced all her words in precious two-year-old speech. I marveled at how much she had grown in just two years. She was so perfect then and so perfect now.

In the video, I saw this innocent little being trying so hard to learn and be part of the world. But as I listened to my voice, I heard a woman way too worried about small, insignificant things that two years later seemed to barely matter. I heard myself asking her not to make so much noise and correcting her for asking for something too forcefully. I heard a mother trying too hard, and saw a daughter beautiful, just as she was—noise and all!

“Why did that bother me?” I wondered. It was certainly no big deal—just some banging on the counter from excitement over the new toys Santa brought. She was slightly impatient with how long it took for my husband to pry her brand new doll out of the Fort Knox box it was tied in. When I saw how long it took my husband to finally free the toy from the packaging, I actually marveled at how patient she had been during the process. I was getting a little impatient myself just watching it! What was I expecting . . . perfection?

To only be able to go back and soak up that moment again! I would hug her, kiss her, and thank her for being so patient.

- Stephanie McKinnon

Lesson from the Left-hand Turn Lane

As we sat at the traffic light, waiting to turn left, a blind man and his dog taught me something I'd been trying to verbalize for some time.

A black seeing-eye dog, with his head down and ears alert, cautiously led this sweet man across a busy intersection. Everything stopped—all eyes, ironically, on them. I was touched that for a few moments everyone sat there, patiently, waiting for this man and his best friend to cross safely to the other side. Our light happened to be green, but no one moved. I was transfixed by this loyal companionship. I even got a little choked up as I tried to explain to my preschool aged sons what was happening. I wanted them to recognize the simple beauty of what had just happened.

My explanation was interrupted by someone honking. After a split second of annoyance with the impatient driver behind me, I realized that she must not be able to see what I could see. Once the man was safely across, the lady behind me sped up, and after catching my eye, waved her hand, smiled, and apologized. I waved and smiled back.

How many times do I "honk" at my children, having no idea what's in front of them? No clue what obstacle they might be facing, what hurt they are trying to mend, or what amazing spectacle they might be seeing in the grass at their feet? How many times do I honk my way through a busy morning, getting children fed, dressed, and off to our daily activities?

Has it ever hit you, like it hit me today, sitting there in the left hand turn lane? This whole thing, being a mom, isn't about me teaching my children. They're here to teach me. Every bit of patience I show is a measure of love that will be etched in their hearts forever. They may not remember the exact incident, but they will remember the color of my love – a soft, safe color that I hope is painted in their memories forever.

- **Natalie Ellis**

Connections

He shrugs a bit and twists slightly as I reach my arm around his shoulders. He is slightly taller than last week—his feet and arms growing faster than his torso, his thirteen-year-old body gangly. Still, I claim my goodnight hug and a kiss on the cheek before tucking the little ones in bed with storybooks and silly songs. In the morning, it's a short prayer together and my hand brushing across his forehead as he flies out the door.

And these moments, these brief touches, hardly seem to matter until the afternoon I'm stuck downtown and worry fills the phone lines as he asks, "Where are you? You're supposed to be home after school." Or the morning I sleep in and he tiptoes into my room balancing carefully on the edge of my bed to pray with me before he leaves for the school. Or those evenings when I notice him standing quietly in the shadows at bedtime, watching with a slight smile while Mary screams with laughter and Gabriel demands "one thousand kisses."

"You can scarcely imagine what it's like, mom," my nineteen-year-old son tells me, "to be thirteen and feel your body crackling with hormones. I couldn't tell who I was from one day to the next." But I do remember. I remember thirteen—an embrace, even from my parents, felt awkward as I grew uneasily into my body. I remember snapping at my mother and wondering why I was so impatient with

my sister. That same look fills my younger son's eyes when he spits out cruel words and a moment later, recovers, shakes off the mood and seems confused at his unbidden anger.

With little ones, even the most outrageous temper tantrum is quickly followed by an opportunity to reconnect—dinner, a tub, clean towels wrapped around a tense little body, and stories and kisses at bedtime. Most parents innately recognize that children can't fully control their emotions and extend increased love after a necessary scolding.

Yet teenagers, whose bodies and emotions are as much out of their control as a two-year-old, are rarely offered the same compassion. By necessity, I nurture my little ones, but my teenagers, who I've carefully taught to pack their own lunches and wash their own laundry, can become quickly estranged if I don't make constant efforts to remain close.

And so, I unabashedly demand my hugs and kisses, the arm around the shoulder, the whispered prayer for their safety before school. Mood swings and fits of anger will come and go (or not) but my love for my children reaches deep, stretches wide, and like a mighty tree, offers protection through every storm.

- Michelle Lehnardt