

CHAPTER FOUR



C E L E B R A T E Y O U R U N I Q U E N E S S

The Power of Individuality

by Chantelle Adams



Chantelle Adams is a wife, a mother to four amazing children, an author, a youth motivational speaker, and a philanthropist. Ever since she was a little girl, she has wanted to make a difference in the world, and raising strong, responsible, compassionate children is helping her achieve that dream.

Giving back in simple ways draws her family close and provides countless moments of joy. Currently, she and her children have raised enough money to build a school in Africa and have started on their second school in Nicaragua with Free the Children.

Her passion is teaching kids, parents, and educators about leading by example, making a difference, and living a life based on key values. Her company, Foundations For Success Leadership Training (www.foundationsforsuccesstraining.com) has given her the perfect outlet to share this passion with the world. Her desire to make a difference also led her to become involved with The Power of Moms as the Director of Family Volunteering.

Chantelle believes that being a mom is the most challenging, yet most rewarding, work any woman can do. She says, “We are shaping lives and our future with every interaction.”

“It is never too late to be what you might have been.”

– George Eliot

A dear friend looked tenderly at old snapshots of loved ones—her late spouse, her children, her grandchildren, and her great grandchildren. She paused for a long time when she got to a photo of a young girl, about age three, with lopsided pigtails, crouching in a flowerbed with fistfuls of dirt. The little girl’s smile was radiant, and her eyes twinkled with excitement and curiosity. The woman’s eyes filled with longing as she looked at this photo of herself as a little girl. She looked up and spoke almost in a hush, “You see, I knew who my husband was, who my children and grandchildren are—and even my great grandchildren; but I think I lost track of who I was along the way.”

Have we forgotten pieces of who we are? When we’re so busy helping those around us become who they need to be, do we find the time to think about who we are and who we need to be? Do we know who the woman inside the mother really is?

“He who trims himself to suit everyone will soon whittle himself away.” – Raymond Hull

I think most moms have times when they feel sort of “whittled away.” If we ever have a minute to think about who we are and who we want to be, we may find ourselves feeling a little lost and question who we’ve become and what more we can and should be.

But motherhood doesn’t have to be about losing ourselves. It can be about finding ourselves in amazing ways. Our roles and responsibilities add to our character, and all our experiences assist us in growth and development. We are often taken down roads we never would have explored if it weren’t for the responsibilities we undertake. The greatest of these responsibilities is motherhood—and it can offer us amazing opportunities to find ourselves and hone our skills.

The goal is not to simply *go* through motherhood. The goal is to *GROW* through motherhood. Following are several principles that I’ve found to be crucial in cultivating the Power of Individuality as we strengthen our own unique characters and talents as mothers.

Know Who You Are

“Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness, that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, WHO AM I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous? Actually, WHO ARE YOU NOT TO BE?” – Marianne Williamson

To embrace the Power of Individuality, we need to learn to define ourselves not just by what we do, but by who we are deep inside. Who have we always been, who are we now, and who are we meant to become?

We all want our children to have confidence and a strong sense of self, to be happy and rise to their full potential. Perhaps the greatest way for our children to understand and develop their own worth is to see our examples of being true to who we are.

One night, our family made little treasure chests. On yellow circles of paper representing gold coins, we each wrote our talents and abilities. We shared our observations with each other about what made each of us unique. The kids were busy writing when my seven-year-old looked up with a big smile and showed me what he had written. On top of his treasure chest, he had neatly printed the words, “Be Your Self.” He knew the greatest thing about him was that he was an individual, and he was confident enough to just be himself. Don't we all need to realize this more fully?

If we are feeling lost or unsure of who we are, it can really help if we find some time to reflect and write some things out. With understanding comes power to renew our purpose and/or make changes.

One mom suggested this little exercise to help us find our true selves.

Try taking a few minutes to make a list of a bunch of the different facets of who you are. You could write it in your journal. What matters most to you? What do you love? What does your heart wish for? My list looks something like this:

- *I love to sing and play music.*
- *I appreciate the beauty of nature.*
- *I love getting outside; doing things like hiking, camping and walking.*
- *I love to read.*
- *I always try my best to answer when my kids ask “why?”*
- *I want to live in a smaller home and spend extra money on traveling with my family.*
- *I want to see more opportunities to serve and help my kids see them also.*
- *I want my kitchen to be a gathering place in our home.*

Now think about how each of these things is—or isn't—incorporated into your life. Make note of what you wish was more evident. It might take time, but as you really ponder these things, you will start to see firm ideas rise up, distinct goals, and direct paths. You will feel the strength that comes from embracing who you are. You will feel the freedom of letting go of trying to be like other mothers around you. You will see much more clearly how, more than anything else, you are the right mother for your children and your unique interests and talents can benefit your family greatly.

- Terri-Ann Gawthroupe

As we take time to be still and really think about who we are and who we are striving to become, we will find confidence and an ability to intertwine our needs and desires with the demands of everyday life.

Accept that There's No One Right Way

Most moms want a lot of the same things for themselves, their children and their families. But even those who share our goals may have different methods that will get them to the same end. We're all different, and that's OK. It's a beautiful thing to celebrate other moms and their individuality and encourage and support each with love and admiration. I have gained a lot of wisdom and insight from watching and talking to other moms. Life is a process of discovery and as we learn from others and stay true to what resonates in our souls, we will find ourselves content and joyful.

The following story illustrates this point very well:

What possessed three busy mothers to channel their inner Martha Stewart, I'll never know. There we were with ten young children between us in a steamy kitchen—boxes of fragrant peaches daring us to process them. I guess we had visions of connecting to previous generations through doing what our grandmothers had done—plus, homemade bottled peaches sounded so good. Having gathered the necessary supplies, we entered the kitchen, confident that our efforts would be richly rewarded.

Of course, when we unpacked the glass jars, we soon realized each of us had some pretty different ideas about how to get to the shared end goal. Was it best to wash and dry by hand, boil and oven-dry, or use the dishwasher to sterilize the bottles? Should we remove the peel by individually blanching or dumping them in a sink full of boiling water? Halve, quarter, or slice? Light or heavy syrup?

After some polite discussion, we each decided to prepare our own batch the way we had been taught since we were each convinced our way was the best recipe for success. Hours later we emerged, sweaty, sticky and immensely satisfied with the fruits of our labors glistening on the counter in the late afternoon sun. Was it worth it? One bite left no room for doubt.

More impressive than the peaches was the principle I internalized that day: there is no one right way to prepare and preserve peaches! There are guidelines and basic principles that need to be followed, but allowances can and should be made for individual adaptation. And what's "perfect" in a bottled peach to one person might not be quite right to someone else.

Most mothers I know are all well-intentioned, talented women who want the best for their children and have their own unique ideas and methods. There is no ultimate, foolproof way to mother. There are however, plenty of good reasons to give ourselves, and others, room to personalize the parenting process.

In the end, we will all find joy in the fruits of our labors and the sweetness of our love shared with those who matter most. Although we may choose different paths and have different strengths, we can all get the same outcome of happiness and peace. We must

pick the methods that work best for us and learn not to care whether or not others choose to do things the same way.

- Rebecca Owen

Define what Success is to You

Success means different things to different people. What is true success? Is it happiness, contentment, a peaceful home, a child who is confident, a family who makes a difference? What is your definition of success?

“Success means doing the best we can with what we have. Success is the doing, not the getting; in the trying, not the triumph. Success is a personal standard, reaching for the highest that is in us, becoming all that we can be.” – Zig Ziglar

One mom shares a personal experience that teaches us to strive to achieve our own kind of success and our own personal best.

As a mother, you might think that “PB” stands for a sticky something you frequently spread on your child’s sandwich. PB also stands for “personal best.”

After having my third daughter, I was excited to get back into a regular exercise routine. I began a running/walking schedule and got to the point where I could run for 30 minutes nonstop, which was a huge breakthrough for me. But, I realized I needed a fitness goal: something to accomplish.

I always claimed I was NOT marathon material. They ran fast, I ran slow. They ran to win, I ran to recover. Running was therapeutic for me, so why would I want to run in a race where everyone was trying to run faster than me?

However, with my husband’s support and encouragement, I realized I could run a half marathon as a fun goal and at my own pace. This is when I started to grasp the concept of “your own personal best.”

Too often when I had tried to run with those “real” runners, I would come home feeling breathless and exasperated. When I realized I could run at my own pace and enjoy the scenery, I came home feeling happy and content. Interestingly enough, as I trained, my speed did increase, and I achieved a new personal best.

How often as mothers do we try to run at someone else’s pace?

Sometimes we feel like we’re not great “motherhood material” because we can’t win the race. But how do we even define “winning”? Maybe we think we win the race by having the best-dressed children or the ones who always clean up their toys. Maybe we think the race is won by having teenagers who never question our decisions. But maybe we’re striving to win someone else’s race when we really should be figuring out how to win our own race.

Your own personal best is what you make it to be. Mother and nurture at your own pace and in your own way. If I start to feel that I can't keep up with what everyone else is doing, I separate myself and focus on what I am doing.

Then, when I feel I've achieved my personal best as a mother for the day, I feel happy and content...just as I did on those runs when I focused on running at my own pace.

In this fast-paced world, we can all use a reminder to find our own stride, to enjoy the scenery and to determine what constitutes our own personal best.

- Andrea Davis

Figure Out Your Individual Mothering Strengths

“To be nobody but yourself in a world which is doing its best, night and day, to make you everybody else means to fight the hardest battle which any human being can fight; and never stop fighting.” - E.E. Cummings

Most moms I know, including me, seem to have a couple of tendencies that can stop us from benefiting from the Power of Individuality: guilt and what I call, “compare-itis”. When we allow these tendencies into our daily lives, we get pulled down with feelings of inadequacy and discouragement.

When we compare, we often see others at their best and ourselves at our worst. We are trying so hard to do all the right things and be everything to everyone. In trying to be the perfect mother, wife, daughter, friend and woman, we often lose track of what really works for us and end up just plain stressed out. The reality is that there's no one kind of “perfect.” We all need to strive for our own version of perfection—while cutting ourselves plenty of slack.

At a recent preschool activity, my son and I were sitting at a table with several little girls, age three, who were printing their full names using upper and lower case letters. My three-year-old son was as proud as punch that he could make a letter “T” which sometimes looks like an upper case and other times like a lower case, just depending on his connection with the paper as he rushes on to the next activity. I started to feel guilty that I hadn't already taught him to print his whole name and worried that I should have been spending more time teaching *my* three-year-old like these other kids' mothers must have done.

Feeling quite discouraged, I called my mom, which I often do when I am feeling like I don't measure up. My mom was quick to point out the good things my husband and I are doing. We spend time playing outdoors, going for walks, or riding bikes. We read with our children. We go on many adventures: skiing, boating, snowshoeing, motor-biking, and camping. We make sure to do service projects together as a family and talk about the needs in the world around us.

Then in all of her wisdom she said, “Remember to water the flowers, not the weeds.”

How true!

I needed to stop focusing on what I wasn't doing, and focus on the things I *was* doing. I am doing my best in the best way I know how, and it works for my family. And you know what? I am letting my children embrace their individuality, too. Tanner may not be writing his full name yet, but at age two, he was riding his two-wheeler, skiing, and kicking a soccer ball farther than most kids twice his age. His individuality needs to be celebrated and honored just as mine does.

This mom shares some great insight:

There he was—my baby. So little, perfect, and helpless. The weight of what I was undertaking fell on me like a ton of bricks. It was so important to me that I do this—the most important job in both our lives—perfectly.

The nagging little voice in the back of my head started with criticism and discouragement: “What were you thinking, quitting your job—the only thing you’re actually good at—for diapers and housework? You’re not a good homemaker, and you’re no good with kids. You’re going to screw him up, or scar him for life. . . .”

Instead of banishing this voice, I listened to her. After all, she had some good points. I went into my journey of motherhood with one thought in mind: I won’t be enough to raise my son the way he should be raised.

My early experiences with motherhood were sprinkled with some joy, but that negative voice came back time after time, because I didn't banish her. The first couple of years with my son were pretty rocky. I kept piling guilt and disappointment with myself on a growing heap of emotional baggage.

I didn’t realize how destructive my negative thoughts were until after I was diagnosed with depression a few months before my son’s second birthday. I actually believed it might be better if someone else raised my son.

Things changed dramatically for me when I came across the book “Mother Styles” by Janet Penley. She uses personality profiling to help mothers recognize their own way of mothering and how each style has its own strengths.

This book helped me realize that I needed to get to know myself better. I learned to recognize what aspects of my personality and abilities were real strengths in motherhood. I remember the tears flowing as I read this book, simply because the author used the word “strengths” when she was talking about my personality type.

As I read through the book, I found myself in those pages. I’m extroverted, so I don’t like to be cooped up at home with someone who can’t talk with me. I’m prone to

focusing on thoughts, not feelings, which is probably why I find it difficult to relate to little ones who are so driven by emotion. I recognize the importance of a clean home and washing, feeding and clothing my kids, but as someone who likes the accomplishment of checking it off the to-do list, I'm easily frustrated because these things are never "done" and end up on my list day after day.

I realized that the berating voice I was listening to was wrong: I'm not a woman who has no business trying to be a mother, and I'm not alone. I can be a wonderful mother in my own individual way.

This motherhood journey is a long one, and you'll exhaust yourself if you're trying to be something you're not. Penley said, "Discovering how to be a good mother based on your own nature instead of trying to fit yourself into some mold of what a good mother should be is the only viable approach for the long haul."

We should also keep in mind the term "journey." We can't expect to be great at something when we start out. Just like developing skills in other areas, like playing the violin or cooking, you have to practice—maybe a lot. Some things come more easily to certain people when it comes to motherhood. There are things I don't have a natural talent for—but if I assess these things and decide they are truly important to me and to my family, I can keep working on the things that matter and increase my abilities. That's the beauty of this motherhood journey; nothing will stretch you or help you grow more than motherhood because it is so demanding. And nothing else will do so much to help you become the best person you can be.

Motherhood is a big job, but perfection is not on the list of motherhood job requirements. You are the best thing for your family. Just keep trying, and someday you'll see the masterpieces you helped create—and the masterpiece you have become.

- Meg Talbot

We are each the perfect mom for our children. We certainly have things we can work on. But the individual talents, abilities, and ideas we each have are the raw materials we should build from as we become the mother and woman we really want to be—and the mother and woman our families really want.

I remember at the end of a very difficult day, I apologized to my oldest son for all the mistakes I had made. That sweet little boy looked at me with a puzzled look and simply said, "You are the best mom ever, I think you are perfect." My jaw dropped and tears came to my eyes. He could see that I was not only OK; I was everything he needed in a mom!

We are not perfect, but we are doing our best, and our best—not someone else's best—is exactly what our family needs.

When we are able to embrace our individual mothering style and appreciate the uniqueness that is ours, we will find contentment and purpose in our lives. If we all mothered the same way, the world would be a boring place. I may not be contributing to society in the same way as another mother. I may not be mothering the same way as the mother down the street or across the world, but I am mothering in my own unique way, in my small corner of the world. And I'm OK with that. It's right for me. It's what I do.

- Tiffany Sowby

Celebrate the Amazing Things Only You Can Do

"Enjoy the little things, for one day you may look back and realize they were the big things." - Robert Brault

I have always loved to perform, and when I am on stage in front of an audience, I am completely immersed in that moment. I live and breathe the feelings and emotions; I follow my heart and do what feels right. These moments on stage are part of who I am, but the majority of life happens off-stage, behind the scenes. I often catch myself wanting to hurry this stage of life, looking forward to the next stage instead of just enjoying the moment for what it offers. How often do we follow our heart or really immerse ourselves in our daily lives? I remind myself often to take time to really be present, to find joy in the little things that make life big, and to celebrate each moment for the gift it truly is.

One mom shares wonderful insight on celebrating motherhood and our individuality:

In Elizabeth Gilbert's speech, "Nurturing Creativity," she brings to life a wonderful lesson from the deserts of Africa. She tells of African dancers that would perform so magnificently that they would seem to transcend this very earth and appear almost God-like to their audience as they performed with such beauty and majesty. When a dancer reached what seemed to be the pinnacle of perfection in their performance, members of the audience would stand, clap, and shout, "Allah! Allah! Allah!" meaning "God! God! God!"

When the Moors invaded Southern Spain, this was a tradition they took with them. Over the centuries, the pronunciation was changed and the word "Allah" now sounds like "Ole! Ole! Ole!" It continues today for bullfighters or flamenco dancers who give such splendid performances they seem to defy all human ability. "Ole!" the crowd shouts and the audience knows it's a glimpse of the divine.

Then what happens? The next day arrives. The performance has ended. For the performer, the magic is elusive and hard to remember. There are the sore knees, the self-doubt. She wonders, "Will I ever ascend to that height again?" How could it be that just the night before she was lit from within?

Gilbert's take was this: There is a tremendous pressure from thinking you must ascend to such great height day after day. How can one possibly measure up? You can't. But what you can do is show up and do your part the best way you know how.

Gilbert's speech comes to mind often, dances through my subconscious when I'm feeling pressure to "perform." I am not an accomplished African dancer or bullfighter. I am a mother, a performer, if you will, on a different stage. How many times have I worked my magic at bedtime or while reading a story or while settling a fight? Haven't we all had those moments when we think for a moment, "Wow, I handled that beautifully!" Sure, that's happened. But how often has anyone witnessed it, clapped their hands, and yelled, "Ole!" Hmmm. Come to think of it—never!

Neither praised nor witnessed by the world, my magic happens nonetheless, in those moments of motherhood. For these are the gifts I was given. And when we see those moments, we should recognize them. We should shout it from the rooftops—"Ole!"

- Amy Makechnie

Mothers don't get a whole lot of everyday praise or accolades. Only other mothers really understand the hard work we do and the hurdles we have to jump each day as we help our children and ourselves progress in often-intangible ways. We won't always get it right, but we can remember and celebrate the times that we do.

All of us experience little moments now and again when we catch a glimpse of the divine in ourselves as we use our own unique skills, knowledge and insight to help create amazing moments for ourselves and our families. We need to celebrate those moments and give ourselves a pat on the back when we see those beautiful little successes that make all the hard stuff of motherhood worthwhile.

Nurture Your Individuality—as PART of What You Do as a Mother

There was a point after having my third child where I found myself questioning who I really was. All my life I have loved performing, achieving, and doing. I come from an amazing family who are always quick to encourage and support me in my endeavors. I married a wonderful man, and we lived in one of the most beautiful places in the world. I had three remarkable children, and yet I found myself feeling the lowest I'd ever felt in my life.

I had just decided that with three children, I needed to stop doing all the other things that kept me so busy. I knew how important being a mom was and wanted to devote my full attention to this great calling. At the time, I was accompanying a choir, taking a writing course, dancing, organizing book clubs, group date nights and mommy groups, speaking, and writing a book—all on top of the duties of wife and mother of two toddlers and a newborn. It made perfect sense to say "no" to a whole lot of these things so that I could more fully say "yes" to motherhood.

But when I stopped all of these “me” activities and focused solely on being a mother, I felt lost. I was still plenty busy, but I didn’t know who I was anymore. After really searching and seeking to uncover why I was feeling this way, I discovered that I rust out more quickly than I burn out. I needed to be doing things that were important to me while maintaining a balance with being a mother.

I can do the things I love, and I know why I am doing them; it isn’t for the recognition or outward reward, but for the inward satisfaction of doing something I love and making a difference. I can find and develop my own talents while being the best mother I can be. Realizing that I needed to work on myself and still be true to me was the key in finding more happiness in motherhood.

This is a delicate balance and one that continually needs to be reviewed as our needs and the needs of our family are constantly changing. We all have different needs and bandwidths, and the amount of “extracurricular” activities that work well for one mom may be totally wrong for another mother. As stated before, comparing is a bad idea. But figuring out what types of personal-development and larger-world-focused activities we need in our individual lives is an important, great idea.

Here are some thoughts to help you figure out how to balance your personal development and contributions beyond your family with all that motherhood requires of you:

1. Write a list of all your dreams, goals, desires and ambitions. Then list them in order of priority, taking into consideration the season of life you are in and the realistic demands on your time. Choose the things that matter most and will fulfill you.
2. Get your family on board. Discuss with them how important it is for a mother to take care of herself so she can give her family her best. A wonderful example of this just happened this morning. I have a few deadlines pressing on me and was feeling a bit out of balance for the moment, and it was reflecting in my lack of patience getting the kids out the door for school. As I was raising my voice to a higher decibel and speaking with a less than desirable tone, my youngest looked up at me and in such a sweet voice said, “Mommy, do you need to go for a quick walk?” I burst into laughter and replied, “That is exactly what mommy needs, thank you for thinking of me.” They understand that for me to be the best mother I can be, I need to take care of myself physically, emotionally and spiritually.
3. Make a plan. The best intentions will not help things to actually happen. You need to make a plan and set up the necessary ways to make it happen. Maybe you’ll need to hire a babysitter once a week or make sure dad can take the kids for an hour or two while you have a quiet space in your home or alternate with another mom to give each other time to learn and grow.

4. Find ways to weave your individual interests and personal pursuits into your family and daily life.

I appreciate this mom's understanding that we don't have to be gone or away from family to develop our talents and abilities, but we can find ways to do what we love while including our loved ones too!

While I had one small child at home, it was possible to find time during naps or late at night to pursue my own intellectual interests and hobbies. However, as my family got larger, I saw the amount of time left over for my own interests get smaller. I worried a part of me would need to be put on a shelf in order to accomplish the desire of my heart: to be a good mother.

Dr. James D. MacArthur said, "Teaching almost anything will eventually pay off, because the family sits down together and has a joint learning experience." This was a revelation to me and opened up a world of possibilities. If the teaching itself was the important part, then I could teach my children the things I knew and cared about. And even better, I no longer had to wait until my children were asleep to pursue my hobbies and interests. I could adapt them so I was teaching these things to my kids. I could be my own kind of mom.

I began to see that motherhood and self-expression didn't need to be two separate things. Thankfully, you can express yourself right in the middle of your motherhood.

Think for a moment about what makes you happy. What would you do if you had a whole day to yourself? Make a list of things you would like to know more about or that make you excited. What are you naturally good at? Now consider if some of these things can be adapted to fit within your workday as a mother.

If you love great literature, tell your children the story of the book you're reading, read classic children's literature to them, and write poetry and stories together. If you went to law school, maybe you could hold a family court or debate and talk to your children about the legal aspects of current events. If it is dancing you love, put a CD player in the kitchen and dance while you make dinner or make up a dance move that is unique to you and your kids. If you love art, take your children to museums, find great books about art that are kid-friendly, and create a "gallery" somewhere in your home to showcase the family's art projects—yours as well as the children's. Are you a foodie? Teach your kids about spices and cooking techniques and have a night each week when you cook with each of them individually. Nearly everything you love can be creatively adapted to include your children.

I saw my relationships with my children deepen as I introduced them to the real me. Also, I noticed my kids began to discover their own unique interests. They assumed if I was free to pursue the things I was passionate about, they were also. And they were

right. Perhaps most importantly of all, I found myself growing and becoming a better person and mother.

- Heather Hosac

When we are true to who we are, that authenticity and passion will increase our ability to teach, love and encourage our children to be their best selves. Our example will shine through.

Just as we all have different answers to what means a lot to us, what we should pursue, what we're good at and who we really are, we all need to follow our own unique paths as we figure everything out. The principles in this chapter are quite universal and can help us find ourselves and celebrate ourselves in unique ways.

We can be who we are. We can do things our way. We can give our families and the world around us the greatest gift we can offer—the gift of ourselves—the *real* woman inside the mom—the woman that they really want and need.

Let us commit to finding ourselves, being our own personal best, prioritizing the pursuit of our own talents and interests, and cherishing our individuality. We'll be happier, better people *and* mothers as we do these things.

Hopefully, one day we can look back at our lives with a smile and know that cherished pieces of who we have become developed through the sum of our experiences—especially those of motherhood.