

CHAPTER EIGHT



HAVE A DEEPER YES

The Power of Priorities

by Sarah Turner



Sarah Turner is a wife to one great husband and a mother to six children, four boys and two girls, between the ages of 17 and brand new (her baby girl was born right when this book was going to press!). That means she is doing middle-of-the-night feedings, driving lessons, and everything in between—all in a day's work.

She strives to raise her children using old-fashioned values and tries as hard as she can to live a simpler, slower, family-based life, and to keep her kids young in a world that wants them to grow up too fast.

She loves babies, staying home, clean floors, writing, photography, good books, and orderly piles of laundry. Sarah considers the role as mother the most important vocation on earth. She blogs about it all at memoriesoncloverlane.blogspot.com.

Keep Your Head On

When I was young, my dad experimented with raising chickens. We had ten hens and one noisy rooster. The fun lasted until that inevitable day when it was time to fill our freezer with poultry. My dad did the messy work while my sisters and I hid in our rooms. If I had peeked, I would have seen for myself the true meaning of the expression “running around like a chicken with its head cut off.”

Fast forward many years later, and I know exactly what this expression means. As a mother to five, I am managing a household, volunteering at school, renovating our home, helping at church, and anything else that is thrown on my plate. I often look like a chicken with her head cut off—running in every direction but going nowhere, stressed out, and desperately needing a pause or reset button.

One day, while skimming the local paper, I came across a particularly long and impressive obituary. From the picture, I expected a prominent woman with a long list of accolades, awards, and achievements. Instead, I found a heartfelt letter written to a mother by her children. It spoke of her dedication and commitment to raising her family. Little things like her smile, her fresh baked goodies, and her love for life were meaningful to them. This is how they would always remember her. Plus they shared funny stories, like the time she let her boys keep their catch from a fishing trip in the bathtub when they couldn't bear to cook their new friends for dinner. They spoke of the joy she found in her chosen vocation as a mother, her constant presence, and her calm, reliable, and loving spirit. The letter brought to light what a dynamic person she was to her children.

The obituary moved me to tears. All day long it weighed heavily on my mind. I was deeply touched at the purposeful life she had led, and I wondered whether I living life the way I wanted, or simply surviving the life I was lucky to have?

I sat down and answered a couple vital questions—questions that were hard, but gave me important insight into what kind of woman I wanted to be. I asked myself the following: What is important to me? How do I want my children and husband to describe me one day? How will people remember me? I certainly did not want to be remembered as a chicken running around with her head cut off!

The questions kept coming. What do I want to contribute to this world? What do I like to do? What makes me happy? What am I good at? What do I not like to do? Could I make those things go away? If I couldn't, could I make them easier and less time consuming?

I decided to make choices and decisions from that time on that brought me closer to the person I wanted to be.

Answering these tough questions helped me determine the kind of spirit I wanted to exude for the rest of my life. Then I established priorities to make it happen.

Sometimes we get so caught up in surviving the pressures of the day, being pushed and pulled in every direction, that days, months, and even years can pass without making time to think about how we are being perceived by those around us. I wondered if my children saw me as present and available or always occupied with something else. I thought about how I was often preoccupied during conversations with my husband, thinking of the next thing I had to do. Was I giving my best to those I love, or was I making them feel like an entry on my to-do list? I realized that if I didn't establish principles and specific priorities to guide me through deciding what to do and getting through the chaotic days, the chaos would define me.

Examine Your Life

After some deep thinking, I wrote down all my responsibilities and commitments and realized I was going in too many directions—stretching myself way too thin. I wasn't enjoying anything I was doing. I was only trying to get the task completed so I could get on to the next item in my never-ending list.

I lacked passion and focus. I wasn't engaged or enthusiastic. I lacked the very qualities I admired in others. Instead of pride, fulfillment, and the sense of "a job well done," I just felt guilty.

While completing a project, I was feeling guilty about not spending time with my children. I would zip through the project quickly, but once the project was completed, I did not feel proud of the work I rushed through. While I was spending the days with my children, I would be tense and anxious to get to my work later that evening, which would leave me feeling guilty for not being fully present with my children. I would fall into bed almost every evening feeling like I never gave anything my best.

This discovery required me to be brave. Change is hard, and everyone in the family is affected by it. I knew from the soul searching I had done; I needed to make my actual life look closer to the one I desired.

At the time, I was running a successful decorative painting business—a business I operated only at times that did not interfere with being a mom (nights, weekends, nap time). My husband and I decided that we were both willing to make some changes so I could feel like the mom, wife, and woman I wanted to be. We decided I would walk away from my business.

The extra income earned was not worth the mental toll it was taking on me. Every bit of time spent away from my family was spent concentrating on my business. I needed time to recharge through exercise, reading, or spending time alone with my thoughts. It was hard at first to say no to clients when they wanted me for a job. I didn't want to disappoint them. But I found it is much easier to say no when you know WHY you are saying no.

Surprisingly, I was actually giddy after the first “no”. It was fun! It was freeing! A “no” to one thing, was a “yes” to something else, and I was thrilled at what I was saying yes to.

Over the years, I’ve become quite confident at saying no. At first, I would follow the word “no” with a long explanation—which made me sound foolish. Then my mom advised me to simply say “No, it doesn’t work for my family. “ That’s IT. Period. It is absolutely truthful, and how can anyone argue with it?

Matthew Kelly, the author of *Building Better Families*, writes, “We give our time to who and what we love. Children yearn for the time of their parents. In a world where we are pulled in so many directions, finding the time to spend with our children is perhaps the greatest challenge facing parents today. That is why it is so important to know what matters most and what we really are about. The only way to say no to something is to have a deeper yes. We have to constantly assert that spending time with our children is a deeper yes. Otherwise, we will be accosted on a daily basis and carried away from our families by the seemingly urgent things. There are many urgent things in our lives each day, but the most important things are hardly ever urgent. That’s why we need to identify them, give them priority, and place them at the center of our lives.”

Assess and Reassess

Over time, I began to realize the process of establishing priorities is continuous. It’s NOT a one-time question-and-answer session. Reassessing priorities is a life-long endeavor. As soon as we think we have control over our lives or discover the meaning of the word “happiness,” something completely unexpected seems to come along. Such is life.

Learning to anticipate change is important. Besides the usual big changes, like moving into a new home, starting a new job, or pregnancy, there are also changes in family dynamics. Ages and stages of children make them needier at certain times than others. Having an infant with colic, a defiant toddler, or a teenager testing the boundaries are all intense times for mothers.

I find the best way to prioritize during times of change is to remember that less is more. After the arrival of a newborn, for example, I make it a rule to remember to say no to absolutely everything. I expect to be in pure survival mode for that first year, so I go easy on myself. If my children are clean and fed, I have had a successful day.

Know Your Threshold

Another lesson I’ve learned in establishing priorities is to be in tune with my personal stress threshold. When I feel overwhelmed, snappy, and exhausted, and the spirit I want to exude is NOT what I am displaying, I know it is time to take a step back. Knowing and accepting your tipping point and staying under it is vital.

When my daughter was in first grade, I volunteered to be a Daisy Scout co-leader for her classroom. I shared leadership duties with another mom I really admired. She seemed to

gracefully pull off everything she was involved in. By the second week, I knew I was in trouble. A weekly meeting with twenty-five girls was hard enough, but I also had to keep track of my busy three-year-old and entertain his bored eight-year-old brother. On top of that, I was in the heart of my first trimester of pregnancy, constantly nauseated and exhausted.

Meanwhile the other leader was SO into it, soaking up her role with joy. I felt guilty for not enjoying it like she did. I went home every week feeling completely depleted, with a headache from that dark church basement and three whining, hungry children. I'd get a late start on dinner, I would snap at the kids, and I would barely look at my husband when he walked in the door. Daisy Scouts was stressing us all out, and the kicker was, at the end of the year, my daughter told me she didn't really want to join in the first place.

It was a great lesson for me. I realized I needed to be aware of my stress threshold and not expect it to match anyone else's. We all have different goals, strengths and weaknesses. Volunteering is an important aspect of parenting and a great way to be present in your child's life. But it is best to volunteer in an area you truly enjoy and are passionate about, and when the timing is right for your family.

Identify the Purpose

I also learned to keep in mind the purpose of my priority list. Today more than ever, we have so many choices and opportunities for our families and ourselves. Asking myself the question, "What is the PURPOSE of this?"—whether it's a volunteer position, children's lesson or activity, or something personal for me—helps me determine the worth of an activity. I try to select experiences that offer some level of fulfillment—for the mind, spirit, or body.

Katrina Kenison, author of *Mitten Strings for God*, writes, "So often we do things because we think we should, or for fear of being judged or left out if we don't, or because everyone else is doing them, or because our children want to sample every new activity they hear their friends talking about. But how good it feels to release ourselves from the 'should' and to tune in to a different rhythm. To do things just for the fun of it. To have a life that is rich but not rushed, happy but not hectic."

Don't Forget Yourself

Mothers truly are the spirit of the home, and sometimes it's a mighty undertaking. Our moods, our inner integrity, and the tone we set in our homes, are reflected in each of our children's eyes. We owe it to them, and to ourselves, to thoughtfully nurture strength of spirit, or we'll struggle to create a graceful and harmonious life.

One of my favorite quotes says,

"They may forget what you said, but they will never forget how you made them feel." - Carl Buechner

Being a mother is BIG work. It fills our hearts and minds quickly, and no matter where we find ourselves in the journey of motherhood, we need to leave time to replenish ourselves. We must put ourselves among the first items on the priority list, no matter how uncomfortable that might make us feel. Caring for ourselves gives us the ability to offer our families the best we have.

Make Sure it Matters

“How we spend our days is, of course, how we spend our lives.” - Annie Dillard

The years raising children fly by at warp speed. My tiny firstborn infant that once was swimming in his newborn-sized pajamas is now wearing men’s size eleven basketball shoes. Before I know it, my sweet little daughter who loved to play dress-up with my ancient prom dresses, will soon be shopping for one of her own. While we are raising our children, we are growing and changing too.

Life is too precious to live without intention.

I want to be able to say that I lived my days consciously, knowing that I placed motherhood at the forefront, but that I also followed my passions, used my talents, and did my best to make choices that allowed me to live with clarity, purpose and a sense of calmness to days. I want to give a deep yes to the things that really matter.

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Saying No

During a few moments of introspection, I realized the majority of my yeses are being given away to people outside my family, and even fewer are being given to me. But if saying yes to my family and myself is first, then the nos seem to come much easier.

Everyday I need to have time with God, be creative in some way, have a slot of time that isn’t scheduled, and spend time with my kids and my husband that isn’t rushed. These aren’t grand things, but they’re important to me and help bring a sense of calm to my world. They’re also things I never really knew about myself—or maybe I did, but I was just too busy to take notice.

Either way, I now see that the outcome of not giving myself these simple basics is that I start to make decisions for all the wrong reasons. That’s just not an option for me anymore. I can’t be the kind of person I want to be when I’m living that way.

I’m sure there will be times when I will struggle with the fact that saying no will benefit our family, especially when it’s a difficult answer to give, but I’m ready for the challenge. I’ll remind myself that by saying no, I can live at a slower pace and enjoy what’s in front of me.

I'll think about how saying no is helping me to teach my kids to do the same for themselves one day. But mostly I'm going to choose to say no to a few things so I can say yes to what's important.

- **Heather Hamilton**

An Overpriced Spatula

Last year, I went to a cooking show party—the kind of party where you go and enjoy a demonstration and some food, and have the opportunity to buy something used in the demonstration.

This particular party fell on a very busy night. My husband was due to leave for scout camp early the next day, but that night he went straight to bed with strep throat. My girlfriend had just left with her daughters after we'd spent the day working on projects together while our eight kids played. My kitchen floor was in desperate need of being swept.

Material scraps, loose threads, and snack crumbs were everywhere. The slip-n-slide and wet towels lay limply, waiting to be put away. Dinner dishes scattered the counter. My children, over-stimulated from the day in the sun, desperately needed some settling down. My two-month old baby needed feeding. My phone kept ringing with an over-eager friend calling to tell me that Michael Jackson had died.

It was time to head out to the party, but I didn't want to go. I didn't have the energy to go. I didn't have the time to go. I didn't really have money in my budget to go. But I had an obligation. "I was invited, and I need to support this lady," I thought.

So I went, and the party consisted of me, the host, and the cooking show presenter. I felt a great sigh of relief at my presence and thought, "What if I hadn't come? No one would be here. I have to buy something now that I am the only guest here!"

Despite my jumbled thoughts, the party began. I knew that chaos was ensuing at home, but how could I leave this "one dish, black-bean chicken" demonstration without appearing rude? After all, I was the only guest! So I stayed. I watched. I taste tested. And I bought.

Two hours later and twenty dollars poorer, I entered my home. My kitchen and family room looked like a bomb had gone off. My children all began to talk at once about who did what to whom. My tired and sickly husband sat there attempting to comfort a cranky two-month old baby. With one quick announcement I said, "I just spent twenty dollars on a spatula." My polite and ever-supportive husband simply responded, "Dumb."

"But," I continued, "The money was well worth it, because I am committing now to never again go to a party like that when there are other things I really need to be doing."

As I lay in bed that night, I did some self-evaluation. I thought about my earlier declaration, “The money was well worth it, because I am committing now to never again go to a party like that.” I pondered the consequences of my decision. My home, my children, my husband, and a baby desperately needed me, yet I couldn’t let down a lady in my neighborhood? Something was amiss. My priorities were not aligned.

Thanks to that twenty-dollar spatula, things have changed in my life. Every invitation, request, or obligation that invites me to leave my home is now carefully considered. I ask myself, “How will me being away from home benefit me or my family?” That night, I didn’t go to the party to come back a better person. I didn’t go to serve. I didn’t go to set an example for my children. I didn’t go to relax, have a good time, or come home rejuvenated. I didn’t go to spend time with a family member. I didn’t go to lift and inspire another. I went because I felt obligated to someone else.

Not anymore.

I use that spatula frequently—it happens to be my favorite in the utensil drawer. I’ve used it to cook some wonderful meals, desserts, and treats my family has enjoyed. But the spatula came at a price. A price, I can now say, I was happy to pay. Twenty dollars might seem expensive for a spatula, but the lesson learned was priceless.

- **Tiffany Sowby**

First Things First

Lying on the floor next to my two-year-old one afternoon, I watched her play. As she tried to stuff an armful of items into a bucket, she became frustrated that they kept overloading and falling out. I reached over. “Here, Sweetheart,” I said. “Let’s try this.” Slowly, I helped her pull the items out of the bucket. “Let’s put the biggest things in first, then the little things in next.” She watched with satisfaction as we fit everything in. I smiled inwardly, knowing I was teaching a true principle.

The irony, of course, was that I had not followed that principle myself at all that day. I sighed. It seemed I’d been getting nothing accomplished since the moment my infant cried at 5:00 a.m. I was running around trying to mark off my to-do list, but feeling more frustrated than fulfilled. I knew it was because I had not started the day with the “first-things-first” mentality.

C.S. Lewis once said, “When first things are put first, second things are not suppressed but increased.” I love that truism. When I put the most important things first, which for me means taking time to turn inward spiritually, the rest of things in my day come into focus more clearly and are done with more patience, more stride and more love.

- **Kristi Linton**

Wearing Too Many Hats

Sometimes my life gets busy. Too busy. I allow myself to be distracted by too many things. I hear myself saying to the kids several times a week, "Look, you're just going to have to wait a minute." Or, "I don't have time to talk to you about that right now." And, "I want to help you with that but I just can't."

When I start talking like that to my kids, things need to change. The change that needs to happen is with me.

Usually, the problem is that I am wearing too many hats. I am so good at taking on new hats that I end up like The Cat in the Hat from Dr. Seuss. You know the story. Here is little cat A, B, C, D . . . all the way up to Z. Yep, I allow myself to get to the stage where I feel like I am wearing the whole alphabet.

When this happens, drastic action is needed, and I give myself a day off. I take off my hats. No friend hat, no cleaning hat, no gym hat, no blogging hat (man was that one hard to take off for the day), and no chef hat. I decide to just wear my mummy hat for the day.

At first it is hard, but then I feel as if a weight has been lifted off my shoulders, and I feel a real relief.

My goal for the day becomes to just "hang out" at home with the kids.

I watch the kids play, and I sit outside and talk with them. Really talk with them. I listen and love everything they share. They have such cute little ideas and ways of expressing themselves. It becomes a wonderful day, just wearing my 'Mummy Hat'.

- Naomi Ellis

Spinning Plates

I once heard someone compare the way we manage our lives to spinning plates. I can relate to that. A man gets plates spinning, one at a time, atop thin poles, until he has multiple plates spinning and must run from plate to plate to keep each one going before the momentum slows and each plate falls, shattering to the ground. After hearing this analogy, I took a good look at my priorities. I chose several "plates" I thought were worth spinning and tended to them carefully.

And then . . . we had twins.

The news that we were expecting not just our fourth, but also our fifth child, was met with delight and some trepidation. One mother of twins said to me, “Keep this in mind: if it doesn’t directly affect your children, it doesn’t matter.” I thought, “Everything I do directly affects my children! What could I possibly let go of that wouldn’t affect my children?” I started to panic. I looked again at my priorities, but I couldn’t let anything go . . . not yet. So I kept spinning those plates, secretly believing I could keep them all going—even with twins.

The twins were born six weeks early and with mild complications. Within a few weeks, we welcomed them joyfully into our home. The plates began to slow. My husband brought home dinner and searched for clean socks. My nine-year-old daughter wondered if I’d ever be able to hug her with both arms again or if I’d always be holding a baby. Six-year-old Mack showed signs of insecurity, including compulsive hand-washing and a heart-breaking fear of germs. My arms ached to hold my three-year-old daughter. School started. We forgot homework and show-and-tell. I didn’t volunteer. The house was a mess. I braced myself and waited for the plates to shatter all around me.

Then I discovered a secret. Most of the plates I kept spinning were paper plates. When I stopped tending to them, they slowed and gradually stopped spinning. They fell to the ground, but quietly and almost uneventfully. And I realized they would wait there until I could pick them up and get them spinning again.

The panic subsided, and I looked to the plates that were still spinning, and they were precious. They represented each of my family members. “Dave” rather than “Dave’s laundry.” “Grace” not “Grace’s homework.” “Mack” and not even “Mack’s fears.” Now, self-assured, I could assure each family member that I would not let them fall. This season would pass, and we would be better for it.

The twins are now sixteen months. Many of those paper plates are spinning again. The laundry still piles up, but most of the homework gets done. I volunteer in the classrooms and go on field trips. We breathe a collective sigh of relief, and we know better how to love and lift each other. I even make dinner almost every night. But we still eat on—you guessed it—paper plates.

- Marcie Richards