



Defying Gravity...Every Day

by April Perry

When my husband was three or four, he climbed up onto the top bunk bed in his room and jumped off—fully expecting to fly (though he admits he kept his legs under him... just in case). Unfortunately, no flight took place that day, poor guy. I bet everyone has a story like that—a yearning to fly, an unpleasant realization that gravity is no respecter of persons, and most likely a conscious or subconscious decision to avoid pain in the future by giving gravity the awe and respect it deserves.

Now that I'm "grown up" (it makes me laugh a little to write that), there's a whole new kind of "gravity" with which to struggle. This isn't so much a physical pull as it is emotional, mental, and spiritual. It's the gravity that counteracts my desire to be more than I am. "More" does not mean cooler, more popular, or richer to me. It means being more purposeful, doing things that are meaningful, using every available unit of brain power I possess, developing talents, making a difference, and feeling at the end of the day that I did the very best with what I had.

Correct me if I'm wrong, but I think everyone has a desire to defy that kind of gravity. No one wants to get to the end of his or her life and say, "Boy, I really messed *that* up." Whether we realize it or not, we have these feelings because we were made to do important things (not necessarily "cover-of-Time-Magazine" important; more like, "the world-is-a-better-place-because-we-were-there" important).

Mothers experience this gravity of the mind more than any other group of people I know. Children and families, while great sources of love and motivation, require constant attention. Add to that the nature of mothers' responsibilities, the way we program our minds, and the way our society is set up, and we've got mothers attempting to conquer metaphorical Hulk Hogans if they want to achieve their biggest dreams (or even small dreams that are a big deal).

The purpose of this article is to spark some thoughts and dialogue that can help us, as mothers, to defy the gravity that tries to keep us down every day. My hope is that we can see things as they really are and start to reach a little higher. Once we identify the "gravity" around us, its power is minimized. Just thinking about these ideas during the past couple of weeks has had a huge effect on my productivity, my happiness, and my family life.

The song, "Defying Gravity" from the musical *Wicked* was my inspiration for this article. It inspires me to not accept limits that I place on myself or that others place on me. Whenever I am feeling particularly frustrated and want to throw in the towel, I go for a jog and listen to the hope-filled words of the "wicked" witch of the west. Do I want to be a witch? No. Do I want to do what no one expects? Absolutely.

It's a common understanding that no one expects much from mothers. Society understands that motherhood is tough, and although it may seem that there are endless lists of impossible expectations out there to keep a spotless house, carpool to every sporting event, and balance mothering with a high-powered career, "real" people out there typically don't have those expectations. If you meet someone for the first time and introduce yourself as a mother (even if there are other things

you *could* say), you'll usually receive a smile and an "Oh, that's nice," and then the topic will change to something more "interesting."

People generally don't expect mothers to have anything important to say. I know better than that. There is much more to you than society realizes...and maybe more than *you* realize. I don't mind if others have low expectations for me, but the problem is when those low expectations become the ONLY ones I ever have for *myself*.

In order to be the kind of women that *we* consider to be great, we need to carefully examine and create exciting, yet realistic expectations for ourselves. This is not intended to stress us out by demanding that we run faster than our strength allows; instead, this is meant to lift us to where we know we belong. Feeling great about our lives and putting our families at the top of our priority lists are not mutually exclusive.

So How Do We Start?

Here are a couple of ideas that are fairly simple to execute. First, we can do something that is hard every day (even if it is just something simple). There is a constant gravity that tries to keep us in a rut, and stretching ourselves daily will get us out of that rut. We can email someone we admire to ask for advice, take a leap by finally learning a language, be patient when we don't want to be, work for 20 minutes on an online college course, spend time with a neighbor who we know needs a friend, organize a book club, or submit an article for publication (*The Power of Families* would love to publish your work, hint, hint).

These aren't things that have to take away from our families—these are things that can replace time-wasting and give us something motivating to think about during the day. We all know that we waste time every day in meaningless conversations, watching TV reruns, or looking at silly stuff on the Internet. What if we took 20 minutes of that wasted time and tackled something scary? BIG results are what we'll get. Let me add a disclaimer here: if you are pregnant or otherwise overwhelmed with life, just *living* "counts" as something hard. Please don't put undue pressure on yourself.

Another idea is to figure out what *you* like to do, and then start to do it. It's hard to know who you really are after your world has been changed forever by your little cherub(s), but one step we can take toward defying the gravity that pulls us away from our true selves is to identify what we like. Make a list. What did you like to do when you were younger? If you could do anything right now, what would it be? What are some things you could feasibly fit into your life right now that would be enjoyable to you? By coming up with a list of things I love, and making a little bit of time to do them, I give myself permission to be a person again. If you don't have a list, consider getting one ready. I feel happy when I remember, and act as though, life isn't all drudgery. I *like* a lot of things!

Look For Examples---All You Need Is One

Do you ever find yourself making up excuses as to why you're not where you want to be in life? I have done this more times than I can count. "I don't have the opportunity to develop my spirituality—I'm too busy with my baby." Or, "My mind is so consumed with taking care of the house that I can't plan nutritious meals." I could go on, but I think you get the point. After years of excuse-making, I decided I would take the energy I spent coming up with the excuses and apply it to finding moms who were actually living my dreams. Once I found those moms, I interviewed them to figure out how they did it. They were all happy to teach me, and I feel so blessed to know these great women.

I found a mother of three preschoolers who spent an hour nurturing her spirit through scripture reading every day, a mother who genuinely had fun with her children, a mother who didn't stress over

dust on her picture frames, a mother who decorated her home beautifully on a tiny budget, a mother who made her home into a great learning environment for her children, a mother who knew how to breathe during the day, a mother who kept her mind alert in spite of the mayhem around her, a mother who didn't forget that she, too, deserves some TLC, and a mother who wouldn't let anything get her down (and she had a lot of reasons to feel down).

I know I will never be perfect at everything, but by finding just *one* mother who achieves the impossible, we redefine impossible. In the book *Man's Search for Meaning*, a psychiatrist named Victor Frankl tells about his experience as a prisoner in the Nazi concentration camps. I'm going to quote heavily from pages 86-89 because the truths he teaches are SO well-put.

He remembers "the men who walked through the huts, comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread....Even though conditions such as lack of sleep, insufficient food, and various mental stresses may suggest that the inmates were bound to react in certain ways, in the final analysis it becomes clear that the sort of person the prisoner became was the result of an inner decision...any man can, even under such circumstances, decide what shall become of him—mentally and spiritually."

He goes on to explain "It is this spiritual freedom—which cannot be taken away— that makes life meaningful and purposeful." And finally, here is the part that relates to "finding the one" who can redefine impossible: "Do not think that these considerations are unworldly and too far removed from real life. It is true that only a few people are capable of reaching such high moral standards. Of the prisoners only a few kept their full inner liberty and obtained those values which their suffering afforded, but even one such example is sufficient proof that man's inner strength may raise him above his outward fate."

Beautifully said, don't you think? If *one* person has done it, it can be done. And in many cases, we can do it, too.

If You Can't Find One, But You Believe in the "Impossible," BECOME That One

Sometimes, no matter how hard we look, we can't find *anyone* in our circles who embodies a characteristic we are trying to attain. That's when we ask ourselves, "Is this *really* impossible?" If the answer is no, or if we think there might be a chance it can be done, then perhaps we need to be the ones to step up to the plate and make it a reality. If not us, who? If not now, when? It's a sobering thought.

Identify What's Behind the Feelings

This mental gravity I'm talking about often influences us through our feelings. We start feeling tired, frustrated, angry, lonely...you've been there. One thing that has helped me get over this is staying in tune with my feelings and learning to identify why I'm feeling that way. One of my college professors presented the idea that we can actually control how we feel (not a popular notion in a world where people justify their actions based on the feelings that "made" them do it). After each stimulus, there is a space in which we get to choose our response. We don't have to be victims.

I think of this when the children are fighting over who gets to crack the egg into the cookie dough and I want to scream "Then let's just forget these darn cookies!!!"

Sometimes I will feel grumpy and upset (I'm human!), but I'm trying to train myself to ask, "What's going on?" Rarely is the "egg" the real problem. Usually I'm tired, feeling stressed about a problem, or thinking negative thoughts about myself. Sometimes I've simply planned way too much to get done that day, and I need to settle down and take a break. And occasionally I need to check the

calendar and see if perhaps my hormones are out-of-whack (let's be honest with ourselves, Ladies). If so, I breathe a sigh of relief and go lay down on the couch with a fudge bar.

Think About Your Thoughts

Tons of books out there have advice on how to think. Positive thinking won't get you out of an abusive relationship or make bad habits go away, but in normal, healthy situations, controlling your thoughts is one of the BEST ways to counteract gravity. Great thoughts can pull you up faster than gravity can pull you down. Two of my favorite "thought" books are *As a Man Thinketh* and *What to Say When You Talk to Yourself*. If this is a tough area for you, consider devoting some time to thinking about (and working on) your thoughts.

Choose to Act

We are fortunate women. We live in a time and place where we have the rights and the freedom to make our own choices. Let's choose to *act*. Let's act as though we are *already* the people we want to become. Each day, as I am trying to choose wisely regarding how I speak to my husband, how I treat my children, and how I spend my time, I visualize my true self emerging from my old self. Sometimes we don't feel like exerting the effort it takes to grow, but even if we just move a tiny bit closer to what we want to be, that's something to be applauded. We ought to send ourselves thank you notes at the end of particularly stressful days!

We don't have to give in to all the things that want to bring us down. The grumpy lady at the school, the dishwasher breaking down, all those "866" numbers that keep showing up on caller ID, cars needing maintenance, carpets getting stained, a refrigerator that you swear you just stocked, a baby bottom with a really bad diaper rash, ear infections, coughs, feet that grow so fast that you're a regular at the shoe store, mail that keeps pouring in, phones that keep ringing... These things pass.

We can be more. We will be more. Moms can have goals, and yes, it might be hard for us to reach them--really hard, sometimes. We need to carefully plan our schedules if we want to take extra classes or exercise, we need to make time just to think so we can figure out what kinds of experiences we want to have with our families, we need to demonstrate extreme discipline if we want to forego all the junk food that looks mighty tasty at 3 pm, and we have to take deep breaths and work at being patient *constantly*.

Just keeping up with the basics of work, home and family life can take every ounce of strength we have, but there's that quiet voice inside that challenges us to do a little more and be a little better, even when it's hard. That is the voice I listen to. That is the voice I strain to hear when gravity is pulling me every which way. We get to choose for ourselves (each hour) who we are becoming and which voice in our head will win out. Only other mothers truly understand what you're going through. We get it. We're here to help our fellow mothers to learn how to find happiness and be their best selves. It may sound idealistic and unrealistic, but I have no doubt that as we support and learn from each other, we, as mothers, will jump off our proverbial top bunks and actually fly.

Group Discussion Questions

1. What resonated with you most about this essay? What “rang true” to you, or what do you feel is the main idea you can apply to your life?
2. In your mind, complete this sentence: “I want to be more...” (Give everyone 30 seconds or so to think.) What are some of the things that came to mind?
3. What “gravities” (real or imagined) keep you from achieving the things you just talked about? (These can include “time-suckers” like excess television or Internet, they can be attitudes you have towards things, or they can be things that zap your energy and enthusiasm.)
4. What are some things that bring joy and satisfaction to your life - but that you don’t do very much? What do you miss about your pre-mom self that you could feasibly bring back into your life? What are some “great” things you’ve dreamed of doing someday that you might be able to do part of in your life right now?
5. How could you find time to do bits of some of these things in your life right now?

Group Assignment

Try to create **one gravity-defying moment** several days a week (when you stretch yourself to do something hard – do some little thing you've been putting off forever, call someone who might need your call, start a new project...) and write down what you did. Go for at least 3 entries on your “gravity defying” list each week. Bring your list and be prepared to share a few of your favorite gravity-defying moments at the next Learning Circle meeting.

OR

Decide on **one “gravity” or “time-sucker” you are going to seriously reduce or eliminate** from your life. Do this TOMORROW and send out your goal to the group via email if you like. Report back on how you did with your goal at next month’s Learning Circle.