

ARE WE THERE YET?

Finding contentment in the journey.

by

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You have arrived

“You Have Arrived” was my favorite of the many witty sayings on some doormats I stumbled upon during an online shopping session gone awry. I had started out shopping for ballet shoes for my eleven-year-old daughter and somehow ended up on a website that sold doormats. Detours like this happen often online and in real life, where our intentions are hijacked by our actions. I laughed at the doormat though, recalling how Lee and I used to declare, “We have finally arrived,” whenever one of our children reached a milestone. Even though I wanted to order a doormat to let all visitors know “they had arrived” when entering our home, I resisted and clicked back over to buy the shoes.

When my youngest’s legs were long enough for her to operate the swings at the park unassisted, I had arrived. I no longer needed to push and push and push the swing and was free to relax on a bench while the children played. That first time our family walked into a restaurant without a bag of diapers, wipes, and sippy cups, I felt as if I had arrived at a new, glorious stage of parenthood. When all three children were in school all day and I transitioned from being a stay-at-home mom of littles to a normal human who could mop a floor, clean a toilet, take a

shower without interruption, and was occasionally able to see the light of day outside of my house, I had arrived. When the highchair got carried to the basement, when the crib was sold at a garage sale, when the oldest child could mow the lawn – these were all “I have arrived” moments.

It’s strange, I know. Perhaps even lazy. Moving on to the next phase of parenting – no longer needing to push swings, change diapers, wipe noses, pack bags, and complete so many other tedious, thankless tasks parents do – always felt like liberation.

We trade one ache for another, though.

If we’re not careful we can wish our life away with the anticipation of an arrival; sometimes we don’t know where we’re headed or what we’re rushing away from.

A few weeks ago, my sixteen-year-old daughter, Esther, and I were relaxing together in the living room – she was scrolling through something on her phone and I was making museum-worthy (for sure) artwork with gel pens in an adult coloring book. Out of the blue, she said, “You know, you usually don’t realize when it’s going to be the last time you do something. Think about it, there was a last time you picked me up to hold me.” Gee, thanks for breaking my heart, daughter! Immediately, I jumped up, grabbed her, and put her on my lap, which was as awkward as it sounds, considering that she’s a head taller than me. When she shared her epiphany with me, I don’t think being held on my lap was her goal! I was aware of that, but I held her anyway. We laughed at our uncomfortable arrangement with me underneath her.

Ages and stages end. Life isn’t static. I know I’m supposed to appreciate my children at every phase, but I still find myself thinking things will get better when I am past this step or that challenge. Sometimes I’ve wondered if it’s reasonable to expect myself to embrace the moment,

seize the day and all that. Even during good times, I can catch my mind wandering and wanting a brighter tomorrow.

When Esther, our eldest, was eight, we bought her a bunk bed, something she had wanted for a long time. Right away, she began to use the top bunk, just enough out of my reach that I could no longer get to her for hugs and kisses. When tucking her in at night, I began standing on the frame of the bottom bunk on my tippy toes. I kissed my hand and touched her forehead, but it wasn't the same as a proper tuck with snuggly hugs and kisses. I had no idea that the night before we set up the bunk bed would be the last night I'd be able to reach her.

My tendency is to look toward the future and assume life will be perfect when _____ (fill in the blank). I tell myself when such and such happens, then I will have arrived. Arrived where though? I convince myself that the approaching milestone or event will finally bring clarity and calm to all things, and life will be drastically easier and free of discomfort from there on out. Meanwhile, I become blinded to what's in front of me, where I already am.

We are repeatedly given advice to slow down. Pay attention. Declutter our lives. Pray. Think. Be still. One of my ears absorbs this counsel. The other ear hears something else – that I should be more successful, have perfect children, a happy marriage, and career; I should lead a life that can be displayed on Pinterest, know what wine pairs with what dish, be in love with nature, learn to meal plan, get pedicures, own cute leather boots, volunteer with worthy organizations, give money to every charity, know everything about politics and religion. Well, that ear is worn out and wants to jump to the other side of my head to learn more of the slower way.

However, when I try to absorb all the ways to a decluttered, aware, quiet life, exhaustion sets in and I can quickly become overwhelmed. Being grateful often turns into keeping a

gratitude journal; praying turns into a time-consuming habit with prayer cards and techniques; decluttering turns into a project that requires lists and books and charts. My attempts at peace seem to give me more to do and more responsibility and more at which to fail.

The truth is, life is not going to become magical if I start meditating or clean my house or exercise more or whatever I am advised to do that will make me more centered, more successful, more worthy. What if, instead of feeling like I should add something more, I could simply accept and pay attention to what I am and where I am right now?

What if I could stop the madness and just close my eyes and take a deep breath of air that is freely available and really notice and savor the fact that I can breathe? What if I could focus more on what is right in front of me? I want to enjoy my rich and full life with my family without looking toward what is to come or regretting the past.

My three children appear to be on their way toward healthy and well-rounded lives. With Esther at sixteen years old, Alex at fourteen, and Emma at eleven, I find myself looking back a lot on the years when they were adorable and needy. I spend as much of my time peering into the future, wondering who they will be, what careers they will choose, what their families will look like. I'm trying to train myself to focus more on today, to see the dream I'm living right now.

I am trying to love my moments, the heres and the nows. I've been deliberately stopping myself from yearning for the next, whatever the next may be. When I look back on the holy moments I missed when I was a younger mom, during the times I was discontent with my messy house and had a schedule controlled by the whims of children, my first inclination is regret because it feels like half my life was wished away, wishing for the next day, the next stage. But I laid down that regret, and released it, because that kind of negativity won't improve my attitude

toward my current situation with my husband of twenty years and my three children. All I have is today, and I want today to be free from remorse and free from desiring what's out of my reach.

In the Bible, Jesus prays for His disciples, saying, "I have given them your word and the world has hated them, for they are not of the world any more than I am of the world. My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one. They are not of the world, even as I am not of it..." (John 17:14-16).

In my Christian walk, I've read that passage numerous times. I've heard Christians are to be "in the world but not of the world." We are to love others and show them that Jesus is real. We can absolutely be set apart from the world, but it's hard. Personally, I often find myself too weak to resist the challenges and pressures that suck the strength out of me, no matter my noble intentions. But when I surrender and admit my weakness, I gather fortitude from Christ. By leaning on Him, I become more aware of the sacred, which surrounds me as I go about my days.

Simplicity and peace of mind are always available, but society and modern culture tend to aggravate and kick us around until we are anxious balls of tangled souls, unhappy with wherever we find ourselves, searching endlessly for greener grass.

No great spiritual reality, insight, or peace is going to "arrive" when I get my act together; it's already here. My one real life is happening right now.

I can't ingest the entire world's knowledge and problems; I can't figure everything out; I can't be perfect. I know I'm not the only one who becomes overwhelmed with all the worries available to me – my overactive thoughts paralyze me at times. There is a whole world of hurt out there. My kids are entering a scary unknown future. I can't know what illnesses, accidents, lies, betrayals, hardships await my family, but I don't have to know. True peace comes at the times when I remember that nothing will come of my worrying. I will only lose time with myself

and my family because I'm distracted. God is with me, and for today, I have what I have. I am in this house with these people, and for the moment, that is enough.

It's a weirdly sunny February day. The brightness shines through the window, warming my spot on the couch. I have a cup of rich, black coffee next to me. My son, Alex, is on the floor playing a game on his phone and drinking a smoothie he made himself. Esther is in the kitchen packing a lunch. In ten minutes, I need to drive her to the high school for a Saturday rehearsal for the spring musical. Though her part in the show is the smallest possible, she is required to be there for the grueling five-hour weekend practices. Later in the day, Emma and I plan to go to the mall to eat a soft pretzel and buy new shoes. My husband is upstairs in his home office planning a lesson to teach to the young adult Sunday school class at church tomorrow.

The content and sacred life that I am longing for resides in mundane days such as this one. I have already arrived.

Dreaming

Yesterday morning when I woke up, my husband, Lee, was already at his desk, which, for better or worse, is right next to our bed. Sometimes when his gaze is fixed on the computer monitor, his fingers robotically tapping on the keyboard, I assume since he's just sitting there doing "nothing," he would enjoy hearing me talk. I had been cozily sleeping and dreaming of things soft and floaty and warm and wanted to share my gushy experience with him by explaining my dream. I began telling him about the clouds and unicorns and French fries and ice cream cones and other delightful visions that had been populating my subconscious. However, as soon as my story began, (probably much to Lee's delight) it fell apart, as dreams often do upon their reassembling. Dreams are illusions that disappear as we attempt to put skin on them.

I heard somewhere a long time ago that my mom cried tears of joy when she gave birth to me, because I was a girl. I don't know if this is true – but it's possible. Before I came along, my mom and dad had been raising just my older brother for seven years, so a baby girl may have been a delight. With my arrival, their textbook million-dollar family was complete. Dad, mom, son, daughter. Middle class, Midwest, suburbs – the American dream. They had arrived.

That million-dollar American dream of my childhood faded away. One day I had that family, the next I had divorced parents. I was never sure what happened to their marriage. It vanished. And then my mom began floating away and finally disappeared to depression, drink, and suicide when I was twelve. The silky dream deteriorated into a hard reality that left me unable to recall with clarity the innocence and comfort of those early years when life was picket-fence perfect. I wondered what happened to the precious baby girl who had been wanted, who had been the gift to a longing heart. I wondered what happened to my mom, who didn't think her children were worth sticking around for.

Now here I am, all grown up. I'm the mom with a million-dollar family. Lee and I are holding onto dreams of our own. I refuse to let these dreams slip away, dissolve. My reality is a dream come true, though not the dream of unicorns and fluffy clouds, but of children, relationships, home, health. All are miracles.

Lee grew up on a farm in a Mennonite family. He wore homemade and hand-me-down clothing and was given haircuts by his mom. Once a year, his mom and dad took their three boys out for dinner in a restaurant to celebrate the end of the harvest. He lived a sheltered life. Their secluded house was positioned at the end of a driveway that was almost a mile long. The bulk of their social life took place on Sundays at church. Lee and his two brothers didn't get involved in many extra-curricular activities because of the necessary farm work each day. His parents also shielded their boys from a lot of the outside world by their decision to not have a television in the home; this was in the 70s and 80s, back before people had computers and smart phones to stay connected and informed about current events and cultural trends.

In contrast, the television was my closest companion when I was in elementary and middle school. My mom kept our TV in the den, which was the fancy name for the back bedroom at the end of the hallway. That den was my haven of happiness. I watched sitcom after sitcom – The Jeffersons, Alice, One Day at a Time, Laverne and Shirley. When I moved in with my dad after my mom died, I had a TV in my bedroom, so I continued watching as much as possible. MTV came on the scene when I was in seventh grade. I learned from friends how to adjust the dial to receive the music channel illegally. With music videos on all the time, I significantly upped my television-viewing game.

In my home growing up, family members did their own thing. I don't remember sitting down together as a family for meals. I don't remember family conversations about anything important, world events, college, illness, death. When I was in high school, I spent time anywhere but in my house. I worked at my farm market job as much as possible. I had friends who took me in. I wanted little to do with my family. I wanted distance, and the lack of communication in my house made distance too easy for a kid to get. Perhaps my dad and stepmom tried to corral me as a teenager, but all I remember is being untethered, lonely, clueless, and void of much feeling.

Internalizing the rejection from my mom's suicide was probably inevitable, but it proved caustic to my soul. I assumed not having any love was better than having it taken away again. My biggest fear was being unwanted again, so I didn't form bonds with people, didn't open up, didn't live an honest life.

Because I lived outside of rules or discipline, my life decisions were in my own hands. In high school, I got drunk as often as possible, did any drugs offered to me, and tried my hand at selling pills and pot at school – transporting them in the torn lining of my jacket. I snorted cocaine in the home economics room when it was not being used and smoked pot in the biology storeroom, blowing exhaled smoke toward the ventilation fan in the ceiling. Jars of animal specimens lining the shelves watched me with their dead eyes as I puffed on joints with my friends, pretending I was cool.

By the time Lee and I met when I was twenty-four, I was a different person. Drugs and alcohol had been left behind after a few rough post-high school years and lots of growing up and healing. I had given my life over to the cause of Christ and two years later signed up for a volunteer service mission organization that catered primarily to eighteen-year-olds fresh out of

high school. When I arrived at the missionary training before an eight-month outreach to Hong Kong, I made an instant friend in a handsome Lee Landis. He was there to train for a project in Peru. Like me, he was older than the average participant. His friendship made living for three months with thirty other people in a tired, worn house in a historic Philadelphia neighborhood much more palatable than had I been the only “older” person there.

Lee had ventured away from the sanctuary of his healthy, intact, religious Christian existence to experience other cultures and lifestyles. On the other hand, I had joined the volunteer service program to rein in my unstructured thoughts and beliefs. I wanted to narrow my focus toward Christianity, while Lee was there to broaden his understanding. In addition to being older than the others, we also had in common our appreciation of certain music (Pink Floyd) and humor (Calvin and Hobbes) and were both working to pay our way through college.

The vastly different ways we grew up would be discovered, discussed, understood, and misunderstood as we cultivated a relationship. Not much of that happened those first few months when we were infatuated with one another. Some of our mysteries are still being unearthed. As much as you try to put yourself in someone else’s shoes and practice empathy, certain experiences are beyond reaching, because they come with patterns and feelings and so many attachments. How could he ever understand abandonment and know emptiness when he had always been sheltered from storms and filled with love? How could I understand the blessing of farm life and knowing to my core that I was accepted when I didn’t experience it firsthand?

Two years after our first meeting, I pulled into Lee’s long driveway with my hands shaking and stomach churning. He greeted me at my car and held my hand as we walked into the kitchen where his mom was waiting to welcome me. I had met his parents before, but had not

been to their home. Though the family still lived on the dairy farm from Lee's childhood, they no longer had any cows. His mom operated a bed-and-breakfast in the large farm house.

Lee and I had spent the previous two years traveling individually to different countries. When "home," we lived in different states. Handwritten letters had been the primary line of communication between us. (I can't imagine our reality had we had Snapchat and Facetime.) When we were secured in an exclusive relationship and lovesick to see each other, I hitched a ride with friends from my small Indiana town for half of the trip. In Pittsburgh, their destination, I rented a car and drove a few more hours, alone in a snowstorm, to Lancaster, Pennsylvania. It was time to finally visit the 110-acre farm where Lee grew up.

His mom and I hugged like old friends. She picked up my suitcase and guided me through a labyrinth of hallways and rooms until we arrived at my bedroom. The scent from the vase of fresh flowers on the dresser filled the space with welcome.

Once I was settled in and had taken a tour of the snowy property, we ate baked chicken and potatoes his mom had prepared. After dessert, homemade frozen lemon pie, Lee and I relocated from the kitchen table to the soft, blue couch in the living room and sat close to one another. His mom and dad joined us on their well-worn reclining chairs with an end table full of newspapers and magazines between them. A floor lamp illuminated their faces.

Because the room wasn't set up with a television as the focal point, like so many are, we were forced to look at each other and talk. Lee's younger brother came inside from the shop behind the house where he worked on old cars, his hobby and vocation, pulled up a wooden chair from the dining room table, and joined our conversation.

Where am I? I asked myself.

Tears welled in my eyes as I choked back a reaction I didn't understand. The comfort and ease with which Lee and his family joined together in the unassuming room and shared about their day overwhelmed me. I averted my gaze to the faded, oval braided rug beneath my feet and blinked away the emotion. This type of relaxed gathering happened often, I sensed. The men were in their work clothes, grease permanently stuck under their nails. Lee's mom had her feet up, tired from a busy day. No one performed for me, the guest. There was no pretension, just a relaxed family in the same room by choice, truly interested in one another.

My nerves gave way to calm and quiet. I made eye contact, something I didn't do often because of my insecurities and some social anxiety. I slowly joined in the unhurried conversation.

This moment was pivotal in my life. It was a beginning to my years' long, painful journey toward stripping off my chains and settling into the person I was made to be. The journey will take a lifetime, as is the case with most who are walking toward peace with self and family and dreaming of a fulfilling life.

We were where we were in Lee's house. We weren't rushing about in a frenzy to attack a project or impress anyone. We weren't rehashing a bad experience. We were simply in that living room living.

Walking in fog

I went on a walk in an early morning fog so dense that if I didn't keep my eyes focused on the path, I veered off course. Miniscule droplets of water obscured my vision, forcing me to concentrate on each measured step. I realized that I rarely consider the miracle of my sight, my legs, my balance. That day, I was mindful of it all.

Heaviness hugged me. It wasn't a comfortable hug from a loved one, but claustrophobic. Because it was still dark outside, I became slightly panicky and disoriented in the fog. I had walked the same path many times, but the limited view and thick air trapped me that morning.

Nothing threatened me; I knew this. I knew I would emerge from the wilderness, which was not very wild at all, but rather a paved walking path at the YMCA two miles from my house. Before long, I rounded the bend to see my purple minivan right where I had left it in the bright parking lot.

My life can be foggy. The fog comes in many ways. Sometimes busyness fogs my view of the path. Meaningless and endless details ensnare me. I get caught and wonder when I'll be free. At other times, the fog appears as the everyday blues, not depression-deep sadness, just some moodiness.

Yet, every so often, the fog is deeper than stress or a blue mood. At those times, the weightiness sets in and clouds everything with depression. When that happens, the details no longer rule me like when I'm caught up in busyness. Instead, the details and rules are lost and neglected. In that kind of suffocation, I can wonder when I'll be free.

My brother died when he was thirty-four, after years of drug and alcohol abuse, a lonely death that may have been accidental or intentional. Because our mom died by suicide, I've

always feared I'd end up being suicidal too. Even times when life has been steady, I've doubted my mental wellbeing.

When my youngest child, Emma, now eleven, was in preschool, I was on the brink of turning forty. And I was depressed. Mild depression had come and gone over the years, always accompanied by fear of something deeper, fear of losing my footing altogether and wanting a way out of my reality. My jagged mental state left me crying in desperation during the days when the kids were at school. Only my good friend who knew how to get me to talk knew of my depression, because I was (am) skilled at faking my okayness with people.

After some rocky months, for the first time in my life, I sought a mental health diagnosis from my doctor. With medication for depression, my craggy, intrusive thoughts became manageable.

Some people suffer debilitating effects of depression and anxiety. Thankfully, my mild struggles did not take over my life and make me unable to function and maintain responsibilities. Nevertheless, I remain acutely aware of my mental health issues and know that I'm prone to high highs and low lows.

We have to step deliberately into our days just like I stepped into the fog that morning. It was hard to see the end of the path, but I walked anyway. Finishing a day, a walk, an expedition, a voyage, an experience is much simpler when I know when and where it will end. But, typically, in real life, we don't have that privilege of knowing outcomes. We meander at best, dodging obstacles on occasion. We set out on what we anticipate will be straight progress and are thwarted by ourselves, others, random circumstances, and even the will of God. I trusted the journey. We have to have faith in the journey.

A few days before that foggy walk, someone in our community took his life, which is probably why I remember the day so well. The suicide sickened me; it was such a gruesome one. It also scared me, because he left a wife behind without her husband and children without their father. So many people get lost in their fog.

I must not forget to keep taking my next step. One is all it takes to keep going. When I fear where the road leads, I can still trust the placement of one foot right in front of me. No leaping or sprinting is necessary. No twirling or performing. One does not need to charge ahead with eyes on the finish line all the time. Strutting confidently is not required. My concentration needs to remain on just one step.

Saying that life can be appreciated during dark days sounds absurd. I've wondered many times if contentment is possible somehow during times of depression. Does hopelessness have to walk together with discontentment? I have considered that it may be possible to accept depression as a gift rather than an interference in my life. When I frame anxiety and depression as villains seeking to catch and destroy me, I have the need to stay paces in front of them, always running at a tiresome speed. But, when I view them as tender gifts that give me compassion, empathy, and a unique way to rely on God to direct my journey, I can embrace my impaired vision. God tells me that He will direct my path. "In their hearts humans plan their course, but the LORD establishes their steps" (Proverbs 16:9).

I can't reverse the past or undo any hurts. The physiology of my brain is how God created it to be. But redemption is possible. I have the power in Christ to break the bonds that hold me to former anguish. Mental illness, depression, anxiety. These are real diseases people are challenged with all the time. I have but remained in the shallows. I don't pretend to know the depths of the mental health ocean at which some people swim. My own journey is all I know.

A regular patron at the small library where I work made his way into my office a few weeks ago. He's an over-friendly, outgoing talker whom I don't always have work time to devote to. When I saw him, I knew I was doomed because I was trapped behind my desk with no way to escape his chatter. He's harmless and kind, just time-consuming. He talked and talked and told me that he'd heard me reading to children the previous day during storytime. Then he said the strangest thing, something I'll remember always with fondness: "I wish you would have been a grownup when I was a kid."

After my foggy walk at the YMCA, I reflected on my life. Am I being the mom to my kids that I wanted when I was little? Am I being a good grown-up? What I'm doing now, how I treat my family – is it what I would have wanted? I can be the parent I wanted, the grown-up I needed in my life, by being honest about what has happened and what is happening. I show my children they are loved by being as healthy and as present as I can possibly be. I love them by walking, one step at a time, through this foggy life with them.

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