

Introduction

SUCKER PUNCHED BY GOD



I have a bad habit of opening my mouth when I should probably zip it. Maybe you do too?

Part of it is passion, at least that's what I tell myself. "Go big or go home" has been my motto for as long as I can remember.

For years, ALL CAPS Kathryn always had something to say. I believed the things I shared were just extensions of the life I painstakingly crafted to keep the world from seeing who I really am, what all my fears really are, and how I really love.

An intense worry of being "found out" by my closest friends drove me to build a perfect life, brick by

brick, complete with a picket fence, a spotless minivan, Pottery Barn decor, and kids clothed in Janie and Jack. I guarded who I really was pretty tightly. I was convinced that if any balls dropped, it would be my fault. Plus, not having the answers was an out-of-body experience I wasn't prepared to handle.

Have you ever felt that fear? (Please say yes.) The fear that if you show God—and the rest of the world—who you really are, you'll be standing on an island all by yourself? I had a pretty good gig going as the mom of four, with one on the way.

But God has a wicked sense of humor.

In 2009, we welcomed our fifth child, a premature baby, Luke. He was a dainty three pounds and change, and at nine days old, he was fighting for his life. Luke's chances of surviving were a stark two in ten.

In one fell swoop, that perfect house I handcrafted didn't just crumble; it crashed to the ground—glass shattered, walls caved in, pipes burst, and beams broke.

Granted, it wasn't the first time my faith life endured a sucker punch. But with each of the previous challenges I had been able to weather the storm, rally all my inner forces, and manage to get the perfect house back in order. There had never been anything a little spackle, paint, and strategically placed art couldn't hide.

But that was not the case this time. No amount of redecoration could hide or heal that massive hit to the heart and soul.

I was forced to look deep into the crevices of my life and realize just how much control I did not have. I was reminded of just how messy life can be—how messy life really is. But through the circumstances of Luke's

birth and the effect it had on my other children and my marriage, I also found beauty and a deeper connection with a God who loves the *real* me and takes every trial and error and uses them for good.

That love awakened a desire to cultivate a life framed by intention. Instead of worrying about how clean the van was (who am I kidding, I still care about that), how put together the house looked, or where we vacationed, I started to take stock of the real person residing within my soul. What's the condition of *my* house? Is it centered on a desire to ask God to frame it with purpose? Or am I still trying to be the chief superintendent and project manager?

The truth is I was a control freak who cared way too much about how things looked and not enough about how they really were. I could not detach myself from managing my own life. Truthfully, I didn't really want to.

"Hope deprives us of everything that is not God, in order that all things may serve their true purpose as means to bring us to God," says Thomas Merton, a Trappist monk and author of *No Man Is an Island*. "Hope is proportionate to detachment."

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Luke—the child that I clung to the tightest, the baby I begged God to spare—was God's invitation to detachment. When I was with him at his hospital bedside, all my worldly cares faded away. But as soon as I stepped foot out of the hospital, the cares came crashing in around me.

You and I have a lot of cares in our lives. I care about how tight my jeans are, how my hair looks, and what other people wear. I care what people think about

me. I care how many followers I have on social media (did someone just unfriend me?!) and where other people are vacationing. I care if shoes are left in the hallway, if dishes are put away, or if my kids are making their beds.

Some of the cares we have are valid, but most are not.

There is something so tender and vulnerable about living a broken life. When your soul is exposed and all you want to do is climb out of the nightmare, you do not have time to pretend. You can't manage other people's emotions or worry about relationships. You have no bandwidth left.

In those dark, wee hours of the morning at Luke's neonatal intensive care unit (NICU) bedside, listening to the incessant beeping on the monitor and feeling the steady breath of my son whisper across my cheek, I found a God who was begging me to wake the hell up and be intentional. I mean, right after I threw a fit and told him he was completely and totally bananas. This God had been waiting for me to be purposeful and open to the life he had planned for me. And it looked absolutely nothing like that Pottery Barn-furnished house.

God knows how to find us in the darkness. As the rocking chair tick-tocked back and forth, with my son in my arms and the heart monitor slowly beeping his heart rhythm, we found our radio frequency. Trust me: I begged God to lighten the load. I cried so many tears fighting his plan, telling him I wasn't strong enough to be this child's advocate, heal my struggling marriage, and be a kind and generous friend or the mom my kids needed. I tried convincing him that he was wrong. He wasn't buying what I was selling.

So here I sit, a decade later, with a new, more intentional life. The darkness gave way to light. The fear led to detachment. The vulnerability paved a pathway to purpose, and we finally found our freedom—a freedom to love, to change, to seek adventure, to let things go, and to live a life truly centered on Christ.

As much as I wish I could outline a whole, fancy ten-item checklist for how to live a more purpose-filled life, it's impossible. Life isn't one long, laminated to-do list (even though my grocery list certainly is). Intention doesn't come in check boxes. The lessons our family learned transformed us in every way. For one, we got to enjoy copious amounts of excellent BBQ. But we also learned how to look at every area of our life, hand it to God, and say, "Redeem it." When I invite you to take a leap of faith in transforming your own life, bit by bit, know that I understand just how scary it can be. But do it anyway, y'all.

When we learn that a friend is diagnosed with a debilitating illness or suffering an intolerable season of life, we recognize the difficulty of the journey. We see her suffering and we often provide her with the space she needs. We find a way to forgive her inability to be all things to all people. We often excuse her from having to do all the things and be at all the places. But when *we're* the ones suffering, the ones struggling, the ones trying to catch our breath, we try to power through it all on our own. Surely *we* don't need the same space, the same kind heart, or the same understanding tribe of friends. Or do we?

Ultimately, you have to face the mirror and get honest about what God desires for your family, or you

might as well hand the keys of your soul over to your calendar.

The question I couldn't avoid after Luke's birth was, *Is it worth it?* Your family culture, the relationships with the people you love most, your time, your body, your family vacations, your friendships, and your peace—are they worth it? At 2:00 a.m. when you're finishing up the volunteer project you said would be no problem, is it worth it? The thousands of dollars you spend on extracurriculars, the debt you accumulate buying a life you can't afford, is that worth it? Are you happy you said yes, or are you begging God for a reason to say no? Maybe it's time to start dividing things into two categories: a no or a *hell yes*.

Our family isn't perfect—have a seat at my dinner table and don't mind the spilled milk. But we are better. It has been a messy path to get this far, and I suspect it will always be that way. But I've learned this: when you let the littlest thing transform you, when you let God into all the places—and I mean *all the places*—you will be healed in ways you didn't even know you needed to be healed.

God's grace and mercy will simultaneously blindside you and fill you with gratitude. Because instead of chasing the life you think you deserve, you'll be basking in the freedom of intentional living. You'll stop trying to overdo life, and you'll start living it with a genuine heart—with love, with passion, and with purpose. That's what happens when you understand that being an imperfect disciple making imperfect choices with an imperfect heart for an all-loving and perfect God is living a *hell yes* kind of life.



I have made a pact
with my tongue, not to
speak when my heart
is disturbed.

★ *St. Francis de Sales*

Chapter 1

TALL DRINK OF WATER



It was probably the best blind date I ever had. It surely beat the first one: that guy met me in a station wagon, filled with boxes of balloons for his vending job, and took me to Luby's, instructing me to order the LuAnn platter because it was cheaper. That's a true story, folks.

My blind date with Scott, however, was one for the history books. He met me on the quadrangle at Texas A&M University where the ROTC cadets lived with no balloons in sight. He was in a military uniform looking mighty handsome with his big blue eyes and his biceps, courtesy of a million pushups. A tall drink of water if I ever saw one. I wore a wrap skirt with fringe and cowboy boots with a giant sorority bow in my 1992 permed hair because I was BRINGING MY A GAME. Our lunch date was hardly quiet and quaint. Instead, we dined

with two thousand other cadets in the dining hall. A few of Scott's outfit buddies joined us, along with the ranking captain and his two-year-old son, Larkin. It turned out to be one really loud, really big, group date.

Even though the conversation with Scott was occasionally interrupted with questions from the adorable tow-headed two-year-old sitting across from me, we both just smiled and kept eating. Scott's blue eyes and immaculate uniform kept my gaze, but his patience with Larkin captured my heart. He even skillfully side-stepped all the jeers from his buddies about the "cute date" he had. I was hooked.

We dated on and off, mostly on, for three years. I scored some awesome football tickets, trackside, during his yell leader days (that's Texas A&M speak for cheerleaders), and he accumulated an impressive Chi Omega sorority T-shirt collection. New Year's Eve 1995 he proposed at Reunion Arena in Dallas, where our serious dating had become official at a George Strait concert, three years prior. After my enthusiastic *yes*, we were well on our way to the picture-perfect, white-picket-fence life.

As Scott and I were preparing for marriage, Fr. Mike sat us down to discuss our FOCCUS (Facilitating Open Couple Communication, Understanding, and Study) premarriage inventory results. For the most part, the differences we had were negligible. Except one.

Fr. Mike shifted in his seat and smiled at both of us. "This statement, 'Children will change my life,' seemed to have polar opposite reactions."

I immediately was worried and Scott looked incredulous. I had answered "strongly agree" because how could you not? They would change everything!

Scott's "strongly disagree" was much more pragmatic: "I'm sure things will change, but it won't change the way I love you."

Fr. Mike smiled and winked. "Perhaps that's something that the two of you should discuss further as you prepare for marriage. Children can bring about drastic change in a marriage, but they also provide profound ways to grow in faith."

And with that, we let it lie.

After much preparation with Scott's hometown priest, I was confirmed an hour before our rehearsal dinner and became an official member of the Catholic Church.

Two weeks after the wedding, we started graduate school at Iowa State University and began our first year of marriage in Ames, Iowa. It was mostly good, with the occasional disagreement about artificial contraception and the introduction of babies. Our first argument was over my unwillingness to show Scott more physical affection because of my fear of getting pregnant on a practically nonexistent graduate student income. Our second argument was about whether our monthly budget could afford a once-a-week Coke from the vending machine—a whopping six dollars—during our weekly night seminar on agricultural leadership. Sex and money, that sounds about right.

As graduate students we were struggling to find a spiritual home in Ames. The collegiate church was a little too young for us, yet the other church was filled with a growing number of retired professors and only a few young families. However, after our first Mass at St. Cecilia, the Franciscan priest was eager to welcome us to the parish. He immediately recognized us as the

“new kids,” a perk of living in a small town. Fr. Terry encouraged us to come back the following week, and when we did, he had our parish registration papers ready along with the meeting date of a newly formed young marrieds group. He was sure we would fit right in.

A few weeks later, we sat in a room with four other young couples, three of whom had young children. I scarcely remember our discussion topic that evening, but I do remember after we prayed the concluding prayer, one of the couples said, “Hey, who wants to go out for beer and appetizers?” Those couples fed Scott and me with so much more than libations and great food though. These couples were just a few years down the marriage road, and we gleaned so much goodness from them. They taught us how to pray, how to have fun, how to parent with love, and how to live our faith. They were real, honest, and hilarious. Scott and I became immersed in parish life, serving in various ministries. Those couples showed us how serving the church can feed a marriage. Nearly two decades later, we still keep in touch with three of the four couples, and among us we have twenty-one children.

Two years later, we finished our master’s degrees and began our first professional jobs in Indianapolis, Indiana, with the National FFA (formerly Future Farmers of America). As excited as we were about our careers, the same fears about finding the right church crept back in. We visited a few, but nothing really felt right. After procrastinating for too long one Sunday, we stumbled into the Sunday evening youth Mass at Our Lady of Mt. Carmel. We must’ve overlooked God’s blinking neon sign over the church that evening

that said, *This place will change your life*. The praise and worship music may have immediately spoken to my former-Protestant heart, but it was the energy bursting from those church walls that drew us in. We fell in love hard and fast for the youth program, our priests, and that community.

Prior to the Indiana move, we were living what I'd call a Christian-based life, but so many Church teachings really eluded us. Instead of trying to reconcile and understand them, we pushed them aside. The great thing about becoming volunteer youth ministers, though, is that teenagers don't ever let you off the hook. They, more than anyone we encountered at Our Lady, challenged us. We found ourselves asking the hard questions about some of the Church's biggest teachings and sacraments—artificial contraception, life, social justice, priestly celibacy, and confession. The answers took time and they didn't come easily, but the dialogue began because hormonal teenagers made us come face-to-face with our biggest questions of faith.

A year later, we were invited to go on pilgrimage as adult chaperones with the youth group. We had no idea just how it would change the trajectory of our marriage. We renewed our wedding vows in St. Peter's Square and even came back pregnant with our own Italian souvenir, our oldest son, Will. Some of the answers we had been searching for came a bit easier. It sure felt as if all the pieces of the faith puzzle were beginning to build a strong foundation for our marriage.

A second pilgrimage to Italy, a trip to World Youth Day and a chance meeting with Pope John Paul II, really deepened our understanding of how faith and life intersect. When we arrived home, a job opened up in Texas

for Scott, and we found ourselves at a crossroads. Texas was home, but Indiana sure had become a close second. Our Indiana friends felt like family. Ultimately, though, we made the decision to move south. It's possible that the thought of never having to shovel snow or wear a huge parka to endure the Midwest's winters made the decision *slightly* easier. (You can take the girl out of Texas, y'all, but you can't take Texas out of the girl.)

After our move home, three more babies followed. When I announced my fifth pregnancy to Scott, we were both elated, even though it meant five children in the span of eight years. This birth would come a touch more than two years after baby number four. Our white-picket-fence life sure felt pretty fabulous. That confidence unraveled quickly at my twenty-week ultrasound, however, when we were given the news that this baby would, in all probability, not make it to viability outside the womb (marked at twenty-four weeks), much less to term.

That devastating ultrasound rattled my usually optimistic and steadfast faith. I came home that afternoon and quietly shut the door to our bedroom. I stood in front of our bathroom mirror, laid one hand on my belly, covered my eyes with the other, and sobbed silently so no one knew how much I was hurting. *How could my body fail me like this? How could something so good and pure hurt so much? What had I done wrong?* My head knew this circumstance wasn't tied to a poor choice I'd made, but my heart felt entirely different. Over the course of the next few months I would continue to beg God to let my love be enough to heal this baby.

Luke was born four weeks early at a dainty three pounds. His emergency birth and precarious

forty-four-day NICU stay left my heart very fragile. In many ways, it mirrored the state of my marriage. With each passing day, the distance between Scott and me became greater. We were only communicating about logistics. I was at the hospital all day hearing about Luke's progress and setbacks while Scott was busy working so he could save time off in case there were more hospitalizations or complications. As it turned out, there were many.

Dr. Gary Chapman, author of *The Five Love Languages*, shares that most people have a primary love language—physical touch, acts of service, words of affirmation, quality time, or receiving gifts. When that language is “spoken,” they feel most loved. Not surprisingly, many men cite physical touch as their primary language. It was most certainly Scott's. I, however, was the captain of quality time, craving time with my husband that simply did not exist. The stress of Luke's birth put our sex life on pause for months following his birth. I was terrified of getting pregnant again. As a couple, we were using Natural Family Planning (a natural way of spacing pregnancies, without artificial hormones or pills), but I turned my fear of getting pregnant and having to do this all over again into an excuse to abstain.

That, paired with Scott's love language of physical touch, went *really* well. We were fighting about everything. Bills were coming in, and we were drowning in five-figure debt. Our four-year-old was acting out at home. I had no idea what the third grader and kindergartener were doing in school as I gave up checking their nightly folders, and somewhere in the middle was our oblivious two-year-old. I even fell asleep during the third grader's parent-teacher conference.