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LET. IT. GO.

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PART 1



Why We Women Love to Run the Show



As far back as I can recall, I've liked to be in charge. As a girl I loved selecting a certain flavor of ice cream. As a teen I enjoyed choosing classes and pursuing particular activities. Now I love picking paint colors, selecting furniture—why, even custom-ordering a latte! Yes, exerting control and having a say is fun! It even imparts a sense of pride. Since being in charge seems to come naturally to women, isn't it a positive attribute? Or, carried to an extreme, can it instead cause conflict and heartache? Just why do we women love to run the show?



Wired to Control

Control is a hard-edged word; it has — at least it seems to have — no poetry in it.

Judith Viorst

It is better to take refuge in the LORD than to trust in humans.

Psalm 118:8

I glanced once again at the oak mantel clock perched in my living room, hopeful that time had kindly ticked off another sixty minutes. I was anxious for the hours to accumulate, turning into days that would then form weeks. I strained my foggy mind trying to calculate. I hoped that when three or four more weeks passed, I might actually start to feel alive again.

But alas, the chiming heirloom piece was not my time-accruing friend that afternoon. In fact, only eleven meager minutes had elapsed since I'd last peered expectantly at its Roman-numeral-clad face.

It was the early fall of 1997, and I was pregnant with my third child. I had been diagnosed a repeat victim of what my doctor referred to as “severe hyperemesis.”

Hyperemesis? That's a fancy medical expression that translates into layperson's terms as “morning sickness that lasts all day long.” It was my new, intellectually impressive but least-favorite word. This hurricane of hyperemesis was chronic, constant, and downright debilitating. I'd never felt so sick in all my life.

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With my first child, this condition lasted eight months. With baby number two it was seven. This time, however, I hoped the intense nausea would subside by month six, if it stayed true to its gone-a-month-earlier-each-time pattern.

No tricks or home remedies worked. Eating crackers before attempting to get out of bed each day only made me get sick even faster than when I arose with an empty stomach. Ingesting ground ginger didn't help. Or chewing fresh mint. Or downing any other herb or pill well-meaning friends sent my way.

I couldn't keep solid food down morning, noon, or even night, for that matter. Only sips of diluted chicken broth and occasional swigs of colored sports drinks would stay down. Usually, I had to resort to protein drinks and IVs during a few stints in the hospital to try to help me get well.

So I faced life in a tenuous state, feeling I had an awful case of the stomach flu coupled with the sensation of having just stepped off an upside-down, convoluting roller coaster directly onto a ship sailing off on the choppy high seas.

Okay. Maybe I exaggerate a tad. But the truth is this: there was only one thing worse than my ruthless, all-day queasiness. It was a frightening and foreign sensation that left my stomach untouched but invaded my thoughts and emotions every day. The feeling was that of being utterly out of control.

No Longer in Command

Now I wasn't out of control in the sense that I'd completely lost my senses. You know, the "she is completely out of control" way of describing someone who's behaving in an irrational manner. There was no need to call in the psychologist-turned-daytime-host of the latest self-help cable-television show. That wasn't the out-of-control state in which I found my little under-the-weather self.

Rather, I was squarely situated in a different out-of-control state—I was no longer able to be in command.

Of my home.

Of my children.

Of my schedule.

Of my appearance.

Of so many other basic elements over which we women are used to having jurisdiction.

I couldn't ensure that my kids were dressed in matching clothes (or that they were even dressed at all!). I was too infirm to insist they brush their teeth *all* the way to the back just like the dentist had instructed or to oversee them putting their toys away before bedtime. I couldn't pay the bills on time. Or return phone calls promptly. Or carry out any other task that might require me to actually sit up and think straight.

There were bright spots during my dark days, although I failed to see them at the time. So many people in our circle of life stepped up to serve. My family dined for months on meals that loving church members brought in, and dear friends took turns watching our kids (and their ailing mom) each day while my husband, Todd, went off to work.

Looking back, I see how God took care of every last detail, and I readily admit that neither my family nor my home suffered lasting consequences because of this season of sickness.

Instead, it was I who suffered—shaken to the core of who I thought I was. It was foreign soil to me, dwelling temporarily in out-of-control land. And honestly, it was a place I'm not sure I'd ever visited until my pregnancies forced me to dwell there.

Mission Control

We women crave control. Why, we might even appear to emerge from the womb crouched and ready to manage, plan, arrange,

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position, and take charge. We like to craft scenarios and situate people. Even young toddler girls can be observed lining their frilly dolls up or stacking toy dishes or bright building blocks in a way that suits their fancy. And heaven forbid that anyone should interfere with a girl's plan! These miniversions of us women often instinctively order and organize anything within their reach—objects, circumstances, and later on in life, even living, breathing human beings.

Young females not only desire to control their surroundings; they're actually pretty proficient at it. As an elementary student I noticed that the girls on my block liked coming up with the games our neighborhood gang would play. At school we loved to be selected for special duties, such as delivering papers to the principal's office. As we grew older, my girlfriends and I liked to organize, arrange, and get others fired up about planning a banquet or putting on a play. Being in charge energized us.

In defense of my gender, this is often a much-needed skill. A competent woman can run a bang-up PTA bake sale or plan a fabulous family reunion. She can juggle home, school, professional life, and church duties with downright riveting results! Being able to multitask, to craft duties and delegate tasks, is beneficial on many fronts. The problem lies with our failure to know where to draw the line, to differentiate between leading and bossing, to know the difference between simply taking charge and ultimately taking over.

Competency is a sought-after strength. But if carried to an extreme and left unchecked, our strengths can often morph into wretched weaknesses. We may carry these strengths of managing and positioning to such excess that they hinder our relationships both inside and outside the home. And our controlling nature often gives us fits when circumstances don't go as we'd planned.

We fret and worry and waste unnecessary time trying to remedy situations in which we have no business and where our perfectly powdered noses don't belong. Still we fuss and fume and stridently complain; we bark out orders (or subtly pout, depending on our personalities) and grow ourselves not-so-little ulcers over sometimes-diminutive things.

Scads of women carry this attribute of control into adulthood; some carry it into marriage and eventually into mothering, should kiddos come along. It seems to flow naturally. We transition seamlessly. And actually, this mode of operation is of great benefit to our gender. After all, with all that women must juggle in today's world, a little in-charge approach can only help, right?

Think about it. While there are numerous dads who invest time and effort in raising, caring for, and carting around their children, and who certainly shoulder their fair share of the load around the family's physical domain, more often than not, these duties fall on the maternal side of the job ledger.

As I sit at my writing desk now and glance over my day planner at the week marked out ahead, my eyes land on a list of duties I must perform for my family in the next seven days:

- Sign one child up at the district superintendent's office for middle school.
- Order science and English curriculum for another child whom I homeschool.
- Plan the week's menu.
- Grocery shop, as well as stop at the drugstore for prescriptions and at the department store for tennis-shoe laces.
- Prepare the meals and snacks for the week. (Okay, and

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perhaps order a take-out pizza or two on the crazy-busy nights.)

- Make appointments for both boys at the eye doctor.
- Do a few loads of laundry (my kids do their own).
- Clean the house (supervising one child and delegating tasks to another).
- Reorganize the coat closets, getting them ready them for fall.
- Haul one child back and forth to football practice four nights of the week.
- Call three colleges to arrange visits for my high school son.
- Order more checks for the checkbook.
- Deposit money in the bank account from the family garage sale.
- Break down and clean up after the family garage sale, donating leftover items to charity.
- Call to check on three different aging parents, two of whom may be facing surgery.
- Mail a care package to my daughter, who lives in North Carolina.

Whew! I'm tired just typing out that list on my keyboard!

So while women may tend to be take-charge sorts, in our defense we often have a lot on our plates. Some gals possess a stack of plates that are almost ready to topple, the plates are laden so high. When we ladies are responsible for so many people and tasks, it seems natural, and even necessary, to call all the shots.

In fact, we can even attempt to glaze this grab for power with an opaque film of righteousness. After all, maybe we're taking God's directions to us in Colossians 3:23 seriously: "Work willingly at whatever you do, as though you were working for the Lord rather than for people" (NLT). Well, then, aren't we just being good church girls, trying to serve Jesus by being in charge of it all? Yep, that's it. We're simply being careful and conscientious.

Therein, fellow control freak of mine, lies the problem. There exists a minuscule line between being conscientious and being controlling. A marker so fine, we women cross it without even noticing that it's stretched out right there in front of us, waiting to trip us up. What we must do is determine the difference between being conscientious (our part) and being in control (God's job).

Two Stunning Revelations

That crisp Michigan autumn when I was barely able to be in charge of anything found me bordering on depression. I couldn't care for my two kids, cook a minimal meal, run the washer or dryer—not to mention sort the lights, whites, and darks—or carry out any of the other mostly mundane tasks of motherhood.

I recall lying on the sofa, hot tears soaking into a scratchy throw pillow, as two teens from our youth group came over to clean my house from filthy top to grimy bottom. My husband was a youth pastor, and many of the teenagers wanted to help our family out. I wish I could say I graciously accepted the domestic assistance the sweet girls willingly offered. Sadly, I did not. While I said nothing to them but to squeak out a weak "Thank you," inside I was a knotted, emotionally stressed mess.

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I fretted over the dirty floors. I was embarrassed by the sticky soda spills that now acted as a messy magnet for lint and dirt. I was horror-struck that someone else had to deal with my grunge because I was too sick to sit up without fainting, let alone to wield a mop or whisk a broom.

The salty tears stung my face, making me feel more ill than I already was. My only escape was sleep. So I drifted off. As I did I prayed that when I awoke I'd miraculously feel better. Then I could get out of this miserable state and back into the driver's seat again.

I've had over a decade now to analyze what it was that bothered me so when I had to loosen my death grip on life's steering wheel. Was it a feeling of helplessness? Or was I concerned about my reputation, afraid of being labeled incapable on the home front, a place where I thought I had it all together?

Maybe I resented being viewed as lazy. Some women in my life were certain I couldn't be *that* sick, since they had breezed through their pregnancies with nary a trace of morning sickness.

Was it concern for my children, whom God had entrusted to me? Was I worried they wouldn't be cared for properly or that they would be emotionally damaged because they had an unwell mommy who was out of commission for long stretches of their toddler years?

Or was it old-fashioned guilt? Seeing my sweet husband be both mom and dad, as well as chief cook, sock sorter, and chauffeur, made me feel to blame for his increased workload around the house. After all, he was already working more than forty-five hours a week at his marketplace job.

I think all those scenarios came somewhat into play. However, if I'm introspective and honest enough, I know deep down

what bothered me most. It all centered on two new revelations I discovered back then that smacked me in the face for the very first time (but most definitely not for the last).

First, I did not fancy the fresh discovery that I was dispensable. Often, in my reasoning, I'd spun a saga to myself where I headlined as the "martyr mom" heroine. "You know," I'd declare, "things around here would totally fall apart without me. How would these people ever function if I weren't here? I am the glue that holds this family together."

Wrong! Lying there watching my family fare pretty well with me out of the picture was truly humbling. I thought they'd surely perish without martyr mom on the scene. On the contrary, they were doing just fine, thank you very much. For the first time as a parent, I had an inkling that maybe I really wasn't "all that and a whole-wheat baguette" as I'd imagined. (I know, I know. The phrase is "all that and a bag of chips," but I never get chips as the side at Panera Bread. I always get the whole-wheat baguette!)

While priding myself on being able to care for the children, run a home smoothly, and do it all with a big public smile, I was also building a little temple to my own perceived abilities. Yes, others could periodically perform domestic functions at my house or even care for my kids when Todd and I went on a date, but completely replace me? Never! I, my mind concluded, am simply irreplaceable.

Or so I'd thought.

Second, and what in all probability was at the crux of my crisis, was this stunning discovery: when I was unable to function, I was also unable to get my own way. (Cue the Frank Sinatra music, please.)

Much to my husband's shock, I was just too sick to voice an

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opinion. Before, I had distinct views about everything from peanut butter to politics. The baby must be diapered a certain way, the fridge stocked in the manner I deemed most logical. I knew which dress Mackenzie looked best in for the Christmas pageant at church and which one made her look washed-out on stage.

I asserted my views openly and persuasively, and it usually translated into me getting my way. You know that old adage: “If Momma ain’t happy, ain’t nobody happy. If Papa ain’t happy, who cares?” How true that rang at my house. Sadly, I made sure everyone shared in the misery if this momma wasn’t happy. And being happy, I thought, meant getting my own way.

The Many Faces of Control

Why are women compelled to control? The answer is simple: because we have a false notion that it actually works. And when it appears that it isn’t working, we think the remedy is found by exerting even greater control. Never in a million years would it cross our conniving minds that the answer in fact lies in letting go, not in tightening our grip. We’ll explore this seemingly backward truth later.

What does control look like? No cookie cutters here. If you observe closely, you’ll realize that not every woman controls in the same way. If you think only the loud, boisterous, and dominant sisters are the ones who struggle with this issue, you’re misguided. We’ll look more closely at the creative ways we try to control, but for the moment, consider how control dons many clever disguises. Here are just a few of them . . .

First, there is the soft-spoken saint, a sweet, helpful woman who says yes to every request whether it inconveniences her or not. You can count on her to come through in the clutch, and do so with a charming disposition. This woman controls by get-

ting along selflessly. She is so agreeable that when it's her turn to ask for something, others will give in. After all, she is always so nice. She controls by her kindness. Although at times it may be genuine, at other times it's not. It's her means of getting her own meek and mousy way.

Then there is the enabler. If her child forgets his homework or lunch pail, she treks off across town to promptly deliver it. If her husband is a harsh man, always hurling hurtful words at her and others, she overlooks the insults directed at her and either runs interference or does damage control when his actions affect others. She crafts excuses for her loved ones' bad behavior, often absorbing the blame herself, even when it was clearly their fault. This woman controls by covering up. She wants her family to have a good reputation, so she seeks to build one all by herself, despite the lack of cooperation from her kin.

Next we have the victim or martyr. She controls not by yelling or barking out orders but by well-timed pouting and the occasional sigh. If a decision is made or a scenario is played out that she doesn't particularly care for, expect sorrow to appear on her face and dejection to come forth in her actions. Since others don't want to hurt her feelings or add to her sadness, they give in to her wishes instead. She gets her way not by stomping her feet but by dropping her smile. When approached, she most likely will say, "No, I'm fine. Don't worry about me. You just do what you want. I'll be okay." Her pouting is powerful. And it is also a creative form of control.

How about the people pleaser? She showers others with compliments. Lavishes coworkers with gifts. She says what you want to hear and makes it her goal to never ruffle any feathers. Ever the chameleon, she licks her finger and sticks it in the air to

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see which way the wind is blowing before jumping on the bandwagon. She may even change her opinion depending on whom she is with and what she estimates they'll want to hear. Her line of thinking is this: if everyone mentally elects her "Miss Congeniality" of the social circle, surely this will aid in her getting her way. After all, she'll be owed so many unspoken favors by so many people that they will happily give in to her wishes. This sister controls with feigned friendship.

Wired to Control

While our personalities and methods may vary, our goal is often the same. And I'd wager that at the root of our problem are exactly the same two issues I unearthed while confined to my sofa of sickness:

1. We want to feel indispensable.
2. We want to get our own way.

Although these two threads are common to the quests for control, an even stronger similar strand is often woven deep into our "I'll do it my way" souls.

We don't really trust God.

Oh, we believe *in* God. We know all about his wonderful characteristics and mighty acts. We know he is patient, loving, forgiving, powerful, ever near, always faithful. Why, he is perfect!

We may even read on the pages of our Bibles about men and women who trusted him with amazing results. But we doubt he'll really repeat this in our suburban, modern, everyday lives. We intellectually believe he does what is best for the world in general, but practically we behave as if in our individual situations, *we* still know what's best.

Our lips may say we trust him, but our actions say the oppo-

site. “If it is to be, it is up to me” becomes our self-serving mantra. Deep in our hearts, however, we long for more.

Controlling is tiring. So is keeping up a good front. But how in the world will we ever change our well-worn patterns? They now feel so familiar, and to the familiar we are strangely drawn, even if we know the results are sometimes disastrous.

I think it starts with admitting that however it may manifest itself in our own unique personalities, we have a problem: our wiring is screwed up. Because of sin, we’re wired to control everything ourselves. And it will take a Great Electrician to sort through our tangled mess of selfish motives and actions and attitudes and transform them into one smooth, humming connection to our Father.

Take it from a self-confessed control freak. It has been my experience, through the school of hard knocks, that there is vast freedom in pursuing a life lived *out* of our own control. So be encouraged. Once we recognize we have a problem, we can begin to seek and apply a righteous remedy, one not found in the pages of a self-help manual or on the screen of the latest psychologist’s talk show, but one straight from the pages of Scripture.

Yes, the cure for our malady lies not in a pill or an old folklore remedy but in learning to walk lockstep with the Savior down the path of *his* choosing. We must be trained to embrace this dichotomy of a truth: in order to get a grip, we have to let go.

So sit tight, sister. Together we’ll learn to discern a crucial life skill: how to control what we should and trust God with what we can’t.

But first, let’s take a little quiz to test our personal control quotient. (We’ll be using such self-evaluation tools throughout our journey together.)

Finding Your Control Quotient

Answer the following questions on a scale of 1–5, using this key:

1. never
2. seldom
3. sometimes
4. usually
5. always

When it comes to making common, everyday decisions as part of a group, like which restaurant to eat at or what color to paint the office, I like to voice my opinion to ensure the outcome I desire.

1 2 3 4 5

I would honestly say that in my personal relationships, I try to get people to understand, and then agree with, my point of view.

1 2 3 4 5

People who are close to me (and telling the truth) might agree that I try to control people and/or circumstances.

1 2 3 4 5

If a situation doesn't have the outcome I wished for, I might try to revisit it with others in hopes of getting the results changed.

1 2 3 4 5

If the outcome of a decision others have made stacks up in a way that upsets me, I tend to dwell on it rather than move on.

1 2 3 4 5

I enjoy being in charge and making decisions and policies, especially in my family.

1 2 3 4 5

I use words carefully to sway others' opinions and conclusions.

1 2 3 4 5

I attempt to evoke emotions from people to get them to think or feel a certain way so it might get me what I want.

1 2 3 4 5

I'm told I am pushy, bossy, or controlling.

1 2 3 4 5

Let's be truthful. I like to get my own way.

1 2 3 4 5

Now, add up your total. How did you fare?

10–20: You most likely don't have major control issues. Wrap up this book and give it to a bossy friend.

21–30: You vacillate between being agreeable and easygoing at times and, in some situations, wanting to take charge.

31–40: You border on being manipulative. There are certain areas in your life where you pull out the stops to get your way. Better watch it!

41–50: Control-freak alert! Your strength has developed into a weakness and sent others running for cover. Time to stop tweaking and start trusting before all your friends and family scatter for good, and you end up a prisoner of your own pushy self! (Don't feel bad. I scored a 46!)

Our Clamoring Culture

[When I was] a child, my family's menu consisted of two choices: take it or leave it.

Buddy Hackett

My words are plain to anyone with understanding,
clear to those with knowledge.

Choose my instruction rather than silver,
and knowledge rather than pure gold.

For wisdom is far more valuable than rubies.

Nothing you desire can compare with it.

Proverbs 8:9–11 (NLT)

Have you ever secretly wished you lived in a simpler decade in history, perhaps one that didn't demand so much of your time, your energy, your money, or your choices? In other words, a time when you had fewer things you felt you *could* control?

When our children were young, they loved for me to read aloud to them each afternoon before naptime. Since we were homeschooling the kids, even as an elementary school student, Mackenzie, our oldest, could still join in on the read-aloud session each afternoon when the boys were toddlers and preschoolers.

Her favorite books were from the Little House series made famous by American author Laura Ingalls Wilder. Mackenzie completely identified with the main character and her dangling

Our Glamoring Culture

brown braids, a gingham bonnet strung down her back, and her accompanying spunky attitude. In fact, Mackenzie would often don her own blue-flowered bonnet, a present from her antique-loving Grandma Shug, and with her matching auburn braids swaying as she played, would refuse to answer when I called for her, unless of course I addressed her as Laura or Half-Pint. There were days she was so in character when exploring our suburban backyard-turned-imaginary-prairie, that I think she actually believed she *was* Laura Ingalls.

Yes, my little lass fell in love with the era of the late 1870s, the time in which the heroine of the Little House books lived. She adored the stories of the simple one-room schoolhouses, the girls' fancy Sunday-go-to-meetin' dresses, and the always-amusing antics of the rurally raised siblings.

As my own Half-Pint became enamored with this culture, I too began to dream of yesteryears gone by. I grew to love the pictures Wilder painted on my mind's canvas of brightly colored jars of fruit jams and canned creations sparkling as they cooled on the counter, the sunlight dancing through the crystal-clear glass. Her description of Ma's fresh bread emerging from the oven made my mouth water and made me want to take up baking whole wheat bread from scratch. (Yep. I did. I even bought a wheat grinder.)

Ma Ingalls was a busy, industrious woman. There were many laborious farm chores for women of this era to perform. And there were manual as well as mental efforts that a prairie homemaker had to exert. Even though I knew Ma's daily existence wasn't a walk in the park (I may have a broken washing machine, but I've managed to avoid grasshopper plagues), there was something about it that intrigued me. What was it?

Simplicity. Pure simplicity that resulted from a lack of choices.

Why We Women Love to Run the Show

Life was hard in the late-nineteenth century for women such as dear Ma, but it seems they accepted the difficulties more readily. After all, they knew they couldn't change the weather, totally avoid disease and pestilence, or even change their surroundings with ease. We, however, have the illusion of control. We think that with the snap of a finger or the click of a mouse, we can change situations and create happiness. The truth is, we can't.

Variety Overload

Today's woman has before her infinite choices throughout the course of her day. When packing lunches for her kids, she can choose lunch meat, leftovers, or good old peanut butter and jelly. If she goes with the deli-meat choice, dozens of types of meat await her at the grocers' counter. If she settles on turkey, then she still needs to choose a brand. Once the brand is selected, then her brain must process the next step—sliced or shaved. And if shaved, well, then, how thinly?

If the lunch-meat decision overwhelms her, this woman can choose simple and go with the peanut butter option instead. But while choosy mothers may choose Jif, the rest of us may stand in the aisles flabbergasted, not knowing which jar to select because of brand-name overload.

In fact, my small-town grocery store has no less than eleven different peanut butter brand names proudly perched on its shelves. Multiply that by two, since each brand makes both a creamy and a crunchy variety. (A few even offer extra crunchy for the nuttiest among us!) Then don't forget to count the organic varieties in the health-food section and the reduced-fat styles. Combine these with the many generic and store brands out in grocery land, and you have more peanut butter selections than you can envision for the humble lunch-box sandwich.

You know what Laura Ingalls took in her lunch pail each day? Anything that was left over from the family's last meal. Ma didn't venture off to town to Oleson's Mercantile for some prepackaged fare — à la pricey juice boxes and yummy, individually wrapped granola bars.

And when Ma planned supper for the family each night, she relied on what was within her reach. She had the meat Pa shot on his hunting excursions to bake, fry, or roast for the main dish. She could also utilize whatever fruits or veggies were in season (or the ones she could bring up from the root cellar).

She wasn't like us, for whom choice overload is a daily reality. We can make almost any dish each night, no matter the season, with just a swift trip to the nearby supermarket. If we decide that meat loaf will be tonight's mainstay, a quick Internet search will give us a million different recipes from which to select. And it will present that pertinent info to us in less than a second (along with the choice of whether to search for *meat loaf* or *meatloaf*)!

I'll bet Ma Ingalls owned only one cookbook, if that. Most of her recipes were probably tucked neatly in her bonnet-wearin' noggin.

And it wasn't just in the kitchen where simplicity ruled in the life of a prairie woman.

She probably didn't have one side of the closet reserved for her skinny jeans and the other side for when she'd packed on a few too many pounds. Her cotton dresses could accommodate a slight flux in her womanly waistline.

She didn't stress over which shade of paint to use in each room of their log home. Or whether the new throw pillows were a good match for the old sofa. (And then debate whether she should return them to Target in the morning and get the sage-

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green ones instead.) She had no picture poses to decide on for the annual family Christmas card. No signature font style and color to select for her email signature.

Speaking of emails, how about this one? No media clamoring for her attention each day. No TV, computer, phone, or radio. Instead, she quietly hummed hymns to herself as she went about her day.

She had no need to fear that Pa had been out in the corporate world surrounded by gorgeous and capable women with whom she felt she just couldn't compare. He spent his days out in the hot fields, continually staring at the big back end of an ox as he plowed and planted. In comparison, when he returned home each night, Ma would look mighty fine to him, even without a stylish haircut or fancy Hollywood makeup. Pa's only vocational choice worked to her advantage here.

Back when women had fewer choices, they didn't have all the opportunities to overcontrol that we do today. Sure, technological and cultural advances present us with boundless inventions and thrilling discoveries. They're supposed to make our lives richer, easier, and more desirable, but do they?

Ma Ingalls, Meet Jane Jetson

When I was a grade-schooler, my older brother and I faithfully watched the Saturday-morning cartoon *The Jetsons*. Set many years in the distant future, the year 2062 to be precise, the futuristic family consisted of father George, homemakermom Jane, teenybopper Judy, and boy Elroy, along with faithful family pet Astro (whose every word began with a growling *rrrr* sound even years before the appearance of the infamous *rut-ro* cartoon-canine Scooby-Doo). The way-cool lifestyle of this clan fascinated me. While it was amusing to follow

Wilma and Fred Flintstone back to the Stone Age, it was even cooler to peek into the future with the ultramodern Jetson family.

Just think, my young mind reasoned. Being able to travel around on people-moving conveyor belts to get places, leaving your deepest secrets in a digital diary, having a family maid that is a bona fide robot, and even flying place to place in zooming spaceships! It woulda turned Ma Ingalls's Sunday-best bonnet completely inside out.

My imagination soared as I dreamed about my life far off in the future to the year 2000. I even whipped out a piece of paper and a pencil (I didn't own a calculator yet) and figured out how old I would be when that fateful year finally came.

Thirty-five. The same age as Jane Jetson. (Yes, Ma Jetson disclosed her age to the world in the first episode!)

Thirty-five. It seemed so "old lady" and ancient to me.

Little did my second-grade self know that once I passed the "old lady and ancient" mark, I'd look back to my Jetson-watching days with longing—longing for the simple days of only three television stations from which to choose (unless the weather was *just* right and the wind carrying in the proper direction; then we could sometimes get Michigan State University's public television station too). A time without the constant interruptions of cell phones and email notifications that chime and beep, beckoning me away from the people with whom I'm presently sitting and connecting me instantaneously with others who are far away and yet somehow need our urgent attention.

Yes, the period of the 1970s and '80s—dangling smack-dab somewhere in between Caroline Ingalls and Jane Jetson—was the world in which I came of age, an era eager for progress

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but still somewhat nostalgic about family, faith, and what matters most.

I really miss it. *Sigh*.

Now, in our current culture, although we aren't exactly all jetting about in our own personal spacecrafts (make mine aqua with a bubble-gum-pink Saturn ring for trim, please), we do have some modern trinkets and tools that almost smack of gadgety George and his crew.

Why, just a moment ago, I took a break from my writing nook here at a lovely west Michigan bed-and-breakfast to pop some popcorn, grab a soda, and visit for a minute with Cheri, the proprietor of the inn. When she discovered I was a writer, she asked if I had a digital voice recorder (reminiscent of Judy's digital diary, perhaps?). She said the model she owns can, after recording your voice, be connected to a computer and then make the computer automatically type out what you said. No need to sit in front of a screen to write. You could be driving down the interstate while "writing" your book or blog post at the very same time.

Jumpin' Jetsons, that's astonishing! (Humor me, please. I'm usually a bit behind the curve on techie stuff. I was the last in my circle of friends to own a DVD player and get a cell phone, and I still don't know if I totally comprehend the difference between a PDA and a PDF. I'm sure this voice-recording thingy isn't cutting-edge, brand-spankin' new, but I'd never heard of it.)

This new invention just might help me get more done in less time, although I'm not too keen on verbally blogging while I drive. But while I fold laundry or do dishes or wait in the car during an unplanned long and rainy football practice? Sign me up, sister!

But what might happen if I were to meander on down to the big city, where the Gadgets Galore superstore is, to hunt for this time-saving, handheld companion? Well, I'd find it all right. Probably in scads of different model types. All lined up neatly in rigid rows next to all of its chrome-colored, button-laded, beeping kin.

Smartphones.

Smarter laptops.

Wireless tablets ready to connect.

Wordless MP3 players ready to record.

Personal video-gaming systems.

And on and on it goes!

Even though some of these current inventions might make my life easier, they also demand that I make decisions. I must research. And comparison shop. And finally I must choose. Like standing in the peanut butter – laden aisle of my grocer's, again my mind begins to swirl.

So many options. And since I want to control what model gadgets I'll garner, well, here I come full circle again. I'm forced to control, to choose, to decide. It takes time. It creates even more decisions and more errands. It can consume a large part of my day, a day when I'm already being pulled in so many directions. Simply because I live in a land chock-full of choices!

I'd even assert that our menagerie of selections, and their accompanying commitments, seeks to chip away at our patience, gobble up our brain space, and erode our enjoyment. Instead of making our lives easier and simpler, these inventions, discoveries, and opportunities can actually make life harder and more complicated. They give us many, many opportunities to control things, when what we really need is a guide who will lead us *past* our need to control.

What's Your Plumb Line?

Have you ever read through the Gospels and noticed how Jesus didn't seem to get rattled by the stuff that rattles us? He didn't seem bothered by busyness, distracted by decisions, or particularly perturbed by people (well, except maybe those persnickety and pious Pharisees. But even then he spoke the truth and moved on rather than dwell on them and their bad behavior). The Lord's ability to interact with others, live his life intentionally, and fulfill his mission in an unruffled and focused manner both inspires and intrigues me.

All around him, people were beckoning for him to do something. His twelve closest friends, the rough and tumble disciples, needed him to feed the gathering crowd. They didn't have any idea how to pull off a catered affair for five thousand tired and hungry folks in the middle of a hot and dusty day on a huge hillside.

Random citizens on the street begged him to alter his intended course and go heal their ailing relatives. Others wanted to press in close to him for a glance, a touch, or a word. It seems that everywhere Jesus went, people needed him and pronto! But somehow the clamor and clutching didn't unnerve him and knock him off course. Why?

Because Jesus had a plumb line.

Here's what I'm talking about: When Todd and I bought our first home, the walls in the kitchen were in such dire shape that they couldn't be painted. They were peppered with bumps and gouges and numerous flaws from their forty years of existence. Their only hope for decorating redemption was to get covered by wallpaper and a hefty layer of underwear.

You read that right. That's what the smooth-talking salesman down at the local paint store called the long rolls of white,

thick, tightly woven fiber that was to be put on the wall before my friend Michelle and I could tackle adhering the wallpaper. This nifty product promised to cover the wall's secret sins.

I selected a fancy-pants pattern from the half-dozen books at the store (can't imagine how many in-person and online choices there'd be out there today). The pattern I chose had a stripe in it (what was I thinking?), so it was crucial that we create a plumb line before starting. Otherwise, the wallpaper might get put up crooked. If we tried lining up the paper with the wall's edge without checking to see whether the walls were right-angle straight and level, then if the walls were cockeyed, the wallpaper would be applied off-kilter too, and it would be horribly noticeable, especially in the bold, banded pattern I'd picked.

So Michelle taught me how to make a plumb line. We started with a winding reel of thick thread that was rigged in such a way that the thread was coated with a bright-blue chalk powder as it came out of the spool. On the end of the woven thread was a small, acorn-sized, grey metal weight.

Michelle stood on a ladder. I stayed happily on the ground. She snugged the spool up to the top of one corner of my retro-but-soon-to-be-modern kitchen and dropped the chalk-covered line. After waiting for the metal weight to stop its pendulum-like, rhythmic swaying, she told me to hold it tight and taut up to the bottom of the wall where it nearly touched the floor.

Then *snap!* she gave the sturdy string a good pluck as if playing a giant bass guitar, and it magically marked the wall with a bright blue line that was perfectly vertical. We used that thin streak as our plumb line and starting point when we lined up the edge of our first strip of wallpaper. At the end of the day, our finished product was neatly and squarely applied. Without that plumb line, the wallpaper would have leaned sideways like

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the Tower of Pisa, making me dizzy every time I cooked in the kitchen.

As Jesus went through his earthly life, he had a plumb line—a solid starting point of reference on which he based all of his decisions. It was straightforward and uncomplicated: he came to do his Father’s will by glorifying him while on earth (John 17:1).

He was intentional about spending time alone with God in prayer, knitting his heart to the Father’s so they were united in purpose. Then, whenever he was faced with a choice, he first sifted it through the grid of glory. He didn’t think, *Will this glorify me?* He pondered, *Will this glorify God?* If it wouldn’t, he didn’t do it. If it would, he proceeded with confidence. He understood his mission on earth and had a proper perspective on who he was. And who he wasn’t.

In John 8, we find the Lord chatting with some of the Jews. They wanted to know who he really was after hearing his claims that someone who believed in him would never see death. Did he think he was greater than Abraham? Than the prophets? Just where did Jesus put himself on the spiritual spectrum of popularity?

When answering them, Jesus humbly declared, “If I glorify myself, my glory means nothing” (John 8:54). He, as the Son of God, had the right perspective on what (and who) our lives should be all about. He knew who should control our choices and who gets the credit for us making the right ones.

Cat and Dog Theology

When I became a follower of Christ late in high school, I first encountered the expression “glorify God.” It was a theological term, and I guessed from how I heard it dangling in some

Christians' sentences, that it was equivalent to the phrase "please God." Well, I've since learned that's only the half of it.

A friend of mine told me about a seminar that came to her church called Unveiling Glory. It had revolutionized how she processed her relationship with Christ. A few years later, my home church hosted this wonderful conference. There I learned firsthand what her excitement was about.

The word *glorify*, as first used in Old Testament Hebrew, means "to make famous" or "to throw one's weight around." So when we say our actions should glorify God, they should point to him and make him famous to those watching. That was Jesus' plumb line, and it should be ours too. It is best explained by a rather peculiar concept I learned from the people at Unveiling Glory.¹

Cat and dog theology.

It goes like this: A dog's master comes home at the end of a hard day. The dog heartily greets him at the door, goes all crazy with affection and the occasional slobber, and fetches his owner's slippers. He is thrilled to be in his master's presence and wants to please him. His actions say this: "You love me. You feed me. You scratch my neck and pet my back. You provide for my every need. Wow! You must be God!" (pant, pant, lick, slobber, lick).

A cat, on the other hand, greets her master at the end of the hard day like this: She doesn't budge when she hears her owner come through the door, nor does she bother to get up off her master's favorite chair. She lies there unimpressed, lazily sunning herself in a patch of sunlight, thinking only about herself. With her ambivalent actions, she seems to say this, "You? Oh, are you home? Ya know, I was just lounging here thinking about you, and I've finally figured something out. You love me. You

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feed me. You scratch my neck and pet my back. You provide for my every need. Wow! *I must be God!*”

When we go through life looking out for ourselves, taking control rather than trusting God for guidance, making decisions based solely on what’s best for us rather than what will make God most famous to those around us, we’re elevating ourselves above God and buying into backward, upside-down cat theology.

Bad kitty!

Because Jesus’ plumb line was to give God the glory and not snatch it for himself, he properly made God famous. And by doing so, he could avoid decision overload.

He made the ultimate, big-picture decision to bring God glory. Consequently, the little day-to-day decisions didn’t fluster him but instead fell neatly into place. He always referred back to his original measuring stick — “Will this bring my Father glory?” Because he wisely exerted ultimate control over what he allowed to be his plumb line, he didn’t need to over-control dozens of minor, time- and energy-wasting decisions. Each person’s request, each time he rested or preached, each conversation he engaged in — he ran it all through the grid of his Father’s glory.

Tool, Toy, or Tangent

I love the plumb line of doing life for God’s glory. But at times *glory* can still feel like a lofty term. So I’ve learned to ask myself a question, in the midst of this clamoring culture, that helps me decide what will glorify God and, in the end, somehow please me too. (I’ve found that striving to please myself often ends up doing the exact opposite. But you can’t ever go wrong when you aim to please God.)

Our Glamoring Culture

So when it comes to a purchase, an activity, an event, a friendship, a hobby, or a pastime, I ask myself, “Is this a tool, a toy, or a tangent?”

Tools are needed. They help us live life. They enable us to take care of our homes and families. They help us grow physically, emotionally, and spiritually. Nothing wrong with tools.

Toys are permissible too. We all need a little fun now and then to help us relieve stress and rejuvenate, to refresh our minds, bodies, and souls. I love me a good toy now and then.

It's the tangents that trip us up—those activities, hobbies, people, or time-wasting habits that knock us off course for an hour. Or a year.

Take social media, for example. We can utilize Facebook and Twitter as tools to keep up with our extended families, or even family members nearby. (Yes, I've sent my child a Facebook message before, summoning him to supper when he was in my house but on another floor!) We can use social media to share and receive prayer requests, to advertise a business or grow a ministry. Social media can be an effective tool.

It can also be a toy. If on Facebook you want to plant your rows of squash and harvest your sweet corn or have yourself a nifty little Mafia war (sounds kinda violent to me), you go right ahead. Have a blast! Just please don't ask me to join you. Those games and challenges would not relax me. They'd stress me out. I'm still looking for the “block all requests that aren't conversations I want to have, parties I want to attend, or causes that I want to give to” button. Yes, Facebook as an occasional toy is great.

Where we get into trouble is when social media crosses the line and turns into a tangent. Who hasn't been sucked into the black hole of social media a time or two? You sit down to check your home page and see what the rest of Facebook land is up to.

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Two hours and hundreds of clicks later, you realize you've been frittering and twittering your time away, with no worthwhile purpose. *Tangent Warning!*

To keep social media from zipping from tool to tangent in less time than it takes to say "Mark Zuckerberg," you'll need to come up with some big-picture control guidelines. These will help you keep from spinning out of control and then being faced with another whole slew of unwanted choices in this media-saturated culture. (Yes, each click brings more choices. So stop clicking already!)

You might consider putting in place some guidelines like these:

- I will only check Facebook twice a day.
- When I check it, I'll also check the clock and limit myself to fifteen minutes.
- I'll make sure I'm not friends with anyone who will pull me in a wrong direction morally, anyone from my past whom I feel uncomfortable having in my life, or anyone with whom my spouse feels uneasy about me connecting.
- With friends whose status updates make me either feel left out, angry, or upset, I'll hide their news feed so it doesn't come up on my page. (They won't know you did this, and you'll still be Facebook "friends.")
- During my time on Facebook, I'll mentally ask myself, "Right now, is this a tool, a toy, or a tangent?"
- If I ever feel that this activity is overshadowing my time in actual face-to-face relationships with my family or getting in the way of my relationship with God, I'll declare a Facebook fast and won't go back until it no longer is a stronghold in my life.

Our Glamoring Culture

Social media is just one area where deliberate simplification may be needed to help you maintain perspective and not wander off into tangent land. There are many other parts of your life where it might be helpful to apply some big-picture control guidelines that will allow the smaller decisions to take care of themselves. Here are some examples:

where you shop

how you dress

what you own

how you eat

where you vacation

with whom you hang out

where you serve and volunteer

what activities and sports your kids take part in

what kinds of media you allow into your family's life

When boundaries and guidelines are in place for your family, you don't need to constantly overcontrol with harping and reminding and correcting. You just calmly point your kids (or yourself!) to the overarching big-picture boundary.

Yes, this is actually a call to control—in order to avoid overcontrol! It's a call to make larger, overarching decisions so the smaller decisions will take care of themselves *or be deliberately and actively ignored*.

Just as Jesus' life was about obedience to God, love of others, and service, so should ours. So we must intentionally put in place guidelines that will help us maintain the proper perspective and, like Jesus, keep our mission ever in sight. As a result, we end up glorifying God and making him famous, not just

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feeding our own wishes and desires and controlling people and circumstances to our liking while we attempt to exist in our crazy-busy, clamoring culture.

It's about Time

If time transport were possible, maybe I'd whisk myself back to Ma Ingalls's era on the American prairie in the 1870s and ask her the secret to her flaky piecrust. Or I'd catapult forward into the future and catch a flying-saucer ride with Jane Jetson, circa 2062. (Hey, that doesn't seem so far off now. I don't need a new-fangled calculator to tell me I'd be ninety-eight years old if I lived that long!)

Alas, I had no say about the time period for my sojourn on the earth. Neither did you. But no matter the era we roam our streets and sidewalks, our mission is the same. Obey God. Love and serve others. And do it with a smile so that the watching world will want to know more about the God we faithfully serve as we glorify him with our choices.

To be effective during our time here on earth, we must each learn to discern and decide just what our big-picture plumb line is. We must weed through the many offerings presenting themselves to us to discover our unique niche in the overall mission that will enable us to glorify God. Then we'll be positioned to maintain our perspective as life comes at us full speed. We'll learn to listen for God's voice amid the clamor of our culture, and we'll discover how we can control what we should and trust God with all the rest.

Oh, and how to make him *way* famous in the process by exhibiting to others our proper doglike theology.

As Astro would say, "Ruff, ruff!"

Other Relevant Tangents

Facebook is just one black hole that can siphon away your time, leaving you distracted and inefficient. Other areas in your life can knock you off course and tempt you to spend oodles of hours on a tangent. Remember, if something is a tool, great! And if it's a temporary toy to help you relax, that's fine too. But watch for the all-out tangent — something that doesn't prove to be helpful, useful, or relaxing but rivets your attention onto the trivial and pulls you away from the important. See if any of the following areas, though not wrong in and of themselves, might rear up in your life as a tangent if given to excess:

- engaging in a hobby, such as scrapbooking, or a pastime that requires equipment or maintenance, such as horseback riding, gardening, motorcycling, or owning a hot tub or built-in pool
- watching television — from morning talk shows to afternoon soaps to evening reality TV
- reading fiction novels
- watching movies
- talking on the phone
- cruising the cyber superhighway looking at websites
- reading daily blogs
- tuning in to home-shopping networks on TV (that can take both our time *and* our money!)
- exercising
- participating in a sport or music group
- shopping for leisure rather than need
- daydreaming
- cleaning (Yes, there is such a thing as overcleaning!)
- spending time with friends

Remember, most of these things may be fine in and of themselves (not the soap operas, by the way). Only you can truly tell when your attention to them has crossed the line and now turned into a tangent.

To recognize a tangent, see if you would answer yes to any of the following questions:

1. When you're through with the activity and peek at the clock, are you shocked at how much time passed while you were doing it?
2. When you're not participating in the activity, do you still think about it?
3. In between times, do you wonder if others are participating in the activity and feel a bit left out?
4. When you're not engaged in the activity, do you plot and plan when to do it again?
5. Has either of these thoughts ever crossed your mind: *I really spend too much time doing this* or *I can't seem to go a day without participating in this activity*?
6. Do you feel any sense of guilt when you've spent a great deal of time in the activity and worry that you're neglecting something else you should be doing, whether at work or at home?

Please note: I am not talking about passions here, not ministry or service-oriented activities. I'm referring to an obsessive, unproductive, or trivial focus on a seemingly innocent hobby or pastime.

The best method for attacking and eliminating tangents is to put some accountability in place. Have a close friend hold you accountable. Have her call you to ask about your tangents and see if you have overparticipated in them. Pick someone who will hold you to your goals but will also have a gracious and gentle attitude so you'll feel free to be honest with her. Also, be sure to give yourself grace as you change your behavior patterns. Some tangents' roots run deep, and weeding them out of your life may be thorny and tedious. Give yourself time. Look for progress, not perfection.