



An Invitation to Imperfect Progress

Emotions aren't bad. But try telling that to my brain at 2:08 a.m. when I should be sleeping instead of mentally beating myself up.

Why had I become completely unglued about bathroom towels? Towels, for heaven's sake. *Towels!*

The master bathroom is the favorite bathroom in our house. Although my three girls share a small bathroom upstairs, they much prefer our more spacious bathroom downstairs. As a result, our bath towels are frequently hijacked. I'll hop out of the tub and reach for the freshly laundered towel I hung on the rack the day before only to discover it isn't there. Ugh. So, I wind up using a hand towel. (A hand towel. Can you feel my pain?) And while using said hand towel, I am muttering under my breath, "I'm banning the girls from our bathroom." Then, of course, I never do anything to make the situation better. And the same scene repeats itself time and time again.

I'd been dealing with the bath towel, or lack thereof, situation for quite a while before Art got involved. Up to this point, he had somehow managed to escape the woes of using a hand towel. But not this

day. And his happiness did not abound upon discovering nothing but air where the towel should have been.

Since I happened to be nearby, he asked if I might please go get him a towel. I marched upstairs, convinced I'd find every towel we own strewn randomly about in my girls' rooms. I was preparing a little scolding speech as I marched, marched, marched up the stairs. With each step I felt more and more stern. But when I went from room to room, there were no towels. None. How could this be? Completely baffled, I then went into the laundry room. Nope, no towels there either. What in the world? Meanwhile, I felt a tightening knot of tension in my neck as Art again called out for a towel.

"I'm coming, for heaven's sake," I snapped back as I walked to the linen closet where the beach towels are kept.

"You'll just have to use one of these," I said, tossing a large Barbie beach towel over the shower door.

"What?" he asked, "Isn't this the towel the dogs sleep on?"

"Oh good gracious, it was clean and folded in the linen closet. I wouldn't give you a towel the dogs had been on!" Now my voice came out high-pitched, and it was clear I was really annoyed.

"Uggghhhh. Is it too much to ask for a clean towel?" Art was asking a question, but to me it was more like a statement. A judgment. Of me.

"Why do you always do that?!" I screamed. "You take simple mistakes and turn them into slams against me! Did I take the towels and hide them who-knows-where? *No!* Did I let the dogs sleep on the Barbie towel? *No!* And furthermore, that isn't the Barbie towel the dogs were sleeping on. We have *three* Barbie towels—so there! Now you have the dadgum 4-1-1 on the towel issue. And none of this is my fault!"

I headed upstairs in a huff to give the girls a piece of my mind. "Never! Ever! Ever! You are *not* allowed to use the towels in our bathroom ever, ever, ever *again!* Do you understand me?!" The girls just

looked at me, dumbfounded that I was getting this upset over towels, and then started profusely declaring that they didn't have said towels.

Back downstairs, I grabbed my purse, slammed the door, and screeched the tires as I angrily peeled out of the driveway on my way to a meeting. A meeting for which I was now late and in no mood to participate. It was probably some meeting about being kind to your family. I wouldn't know. My mind was a blur the rest of the day.

And now it's 2:08 a.m. and I can't sleep.

I'm sad because of the way I acted today. I'm disappointed in my lack of self-control. I'm sad that I accused my girls when later I found the towels in my son's room. Go figure. And the more I relive my towel tirade, the more my brain refuses sleep.

I have to figure this out. What is my problem? Why can't I seem to control my reactions? I stuff. I explode. And I don't know how to get a handle on this. But God help me if I don't get a handle on this. I will destroy the relationships I value most and weave into my life permanent threads of short-temperedness, shame, fear, and frustration. Is that what I really want? Do I want my headstone to read, "Well, on the days she was nice she was really nice. But on the days she wasn't, rest assured, hell hath no fury like the woman who lies beneath the ground right here"?

No. That's not what I want. Not at all. I don't want the script of my life to be written that way. So, at 2:08 a.m., I vow to do better tomorrow. But better proves illusive, and my vow wears thin in the face of daily annoyances and other unpleasant realities. Tears slip and I'm worn out from trying. Always trying.

So who says emotions aren't bad? I feel like mine are. I feel broken. Unglued, actually. I have vowed to do better at 2:08 a.m. and 8:14 a.m. and 3:37 p.m. and 9:49 p.m. and many other minutes in between. I know what it's like to praise God one

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minute and in the next minute yell and scream at my child—and then to feel both the burden of my destructive behavior and the shame of my powerlessness to stop it.

I also know what it's like to be on the receiving end of unglued behavior and to experience that painful sting of disrespect that makes me want to hurt the one who hurt me.

And the emotional demands keep on coming. Unrelenting insecurity. Wondering if anyone appreciates me. Feeling tired, stressed, hormonal.

Feeling unglued is really all I've ever known. And I'm starting to wonder if maybe it's all I'll ever be.

Those were the defeating thoughts I couldn't escape. Maybe you can relate. If you relate to my hurt, I pray you will also relate to my hope.

The Hope of Imperfect Progress

What kept me from making changes was the feeling that I wouldn't do it perfectly. I knew I'd still mess up and the changes wouldn't come instantly. Sometimes we girls think if we don't make instant progress, then real change isn't coming. But that's not so. There is a beautiful reality called *imperfect progress*. The day I realized the glorious hope of this kind of imperfect change is the day I gave myself permission to believe I really could be different.

Imperfect changes are slow steps of progress wrapped in grace . . . imperfect progress. And good heavens, I need lots of that. So, I dared to write this in my journal:

Progress. Just make progress. It's okay to have setbacks and the need for do-overs. It's okay to draw a line in the sand and start over again—and again. Just make sure you're moving the line forward. Move forward. Take baby steps, but at least take steps

that keep you from being stuck. Then change will come. And it will be good.

These honest words enabled me to begin rewriting my story. Not that I erased what came before, but I stopped rehashing it and turned the page afresh. Eventually, I started blogging about my raw emotions and imperfect changes. In response, I got comments whispering, “Me too.”

“Being unglued, for me, comes from a combination of anger and fear,” wrote Kathy. “I think part of it is learned behavior. This is how my father was.” Courtney honestly admitted, “I come unglued when I feel out of control because my kids are screaming or fighting or whining or negotiating and won’t listen. I like silence, calm, obedience, and control. When it’s not going ‘my way,’ I come unglued and freak out and it goes quiet. And then the regret comes.”

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And the comments kept coming, all of them expressing the exact same struggle, the same frustration, and the same need for hope. Women with kids and women without kids. Women caring for aging parents and women struggling with being the aging parent. Women working in the home and outside the home. So many women whose daily circumstances differed but whose core issues were the same.

I realized then that maybe other women could make some imperfect progress too. And this book was born from that simple realization. But I had to laugh at the irony of it. I had just published a book called *Made to Crave* that dealt with what goes into my mouth. Now I was writing a book called *Unglued* to deal with what comes out of my mouth.

Unglued is about my imperfect progress—a rewrite for the ongoing script of my life and a do-over of sorts for my raw emotions.

It's an honest admission that this struggle of reining in how I react has been hard for me. But hard doesn't mean impossible.

How hard something is often depends on your vantage point. For example, consider the shell of an egg. Looking at it from the outside, we know an eggshell is easily broken. But if you're looking at that same shell from the inside, it seems an impenetrable fortress. It's impossible for the raw white and tender yolk to penetrate the hardness of the eggshell. But given time and the proper incubation, the white and yolk develop into a new life that breaks through the shell and shakes itself free. And in the end, we can see that the hard work of cracking the shell was good for the new baby chick. The shell actually provided a place for new life to grow, and then enabled the chick to break forth in strength.

Might the same be true for *our* hard places? Might all this struggle with our raw emotions and unglued feelings have the exact same potential for new life and new strength?

I think so. I know so. I've seen so.

Indeed, emotions aren't bad.

The Promise of Progress

God gave us emotions. Emotions allow us to feel as we experience life. Because we feel, we connect. We share laughter and know the gift of empathy. Our emotions are what enable us to drink deeply from love and treasure it. And yes, we also experience difficult emotions such as sadness, fear, shame, and anger. But might these be important as well? Just as touching a hot stove signals our hand to pull back, might our hot emotions be alerting us to potential danger?

Yes, but I must remember God gave me emotions so I could experience life, not destroy it. There is a gentle discipline to it all. One I'm learning.

So, in the midst of my struggle and from the deep places of my

heart, I scrawled out simple words about lessons learned, strategies discovered, Scriptures applied, imperfections understood, and grace embraced. I wrote about peace found, peace misplaced, flaws admitted, and forgiveness remembered. I celebrated progress made.

And that's the promise of this book. Progress. Nothing more. Nothing less. We won't seek instant change or quick fixes. We'll seek progress. Progress that will last long after the last page is turned.

We will walk through our progress together. You're not alone. Neither am I. Isn't that good to know? Isn't it good to have this little space and time together where it's okay to be vulnerable with what we've stuffed and to be honest about what we've spewed?

There will be tender mercies for the raw emotions. No need to bend under the weight of past mistakes. That kind of bending breaks us. And there has already been enough brokenness here. No, we won't bend from the weight of our past, but we will bow to the One who holds out hope for a better future. It's a truth-filled future in which God reveals how emotions can work for us instead of against us.

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Our progress is birthed in this truth, wrapped in the understanding that our emotions can work for us instead of against us. And then we get to cultivate that progress, nurture it, and watch it grow. Eventually, others will begin to see it and take notice. That's progress, lovely progress. Imperfect progress, but progress nonetheless.

Oh dear friend, there is a reason you are reading these words. There is a hurt we share. But might we also drink deeply from God's cup of hope and grace and peace as well? The fresh page is here for the turning. A new script is waiting to be written. And together we will be courageous women gathering up our unglued experiences and exchanging them for something new. New ways. New perspectives. New me. New you. And it will be good to make this imperfect progress together.



I'm Not a Freak-out Woman

Sheer panic had me banging on the control, alt, and delete buttons simultaneously. “*Please!* No, no, no, no, no, no, no, no!” I turned off the computer, rebooted, and hoped beyond all reason that this little glitch was in fact little.

“Please work,” I urgently whispered, hoping to appeal to the tender side of this machine I didn’t have a clue how to fix.

My daughter had wanted to show me something really cool on the computer, so we snuggled up and waited for the website to load. Suddenly, a black warning box flashed up instead, covering most of my screen. You know it’s not a good sign when your computer screen demands that you send \$49.95 via your credit card to the Internet Security Program because you have been infected with something only they can fix. I knew it was a scam.

But I also knew whoever was behind it had no concern for me, the project due this Friday that was now locked inside this computer, or my suddenly raw and tangled emotions. Some evil computer masterminds with too much time on their hands and brains bent toward crime were holding my computer hostage. Everything I did to try to stop the virus just made it worse.

I picked up the phone to call my computer guy only to discover something had also messed with my phone. My entire contact list had been erased. What? I didn't even have my phone near the computer! How could both my phone and my computer go haywire at the same time?

My pulse raced. "You. Have. Got. To. Be. Kidding. Me!" I yelled while banging the side of my phone into my hand. Surely a little sideways jolt would reconnect whatever had gotten disconnected inside. Surely.

Then things got inexplicably worse. I suddenly felt like I was living out the lyrics of a bad country song when, in addition to all things technical going wrong, my dog started getting sick all over my bedroom carpet. Of course, it had to be the carpet. Ninety percent of the flooring downstairs is either wood or tile, which makes cleanup easy. But easy just wouldn't do in this moment.

Nope.

Surely one of my children would be eager to help me. But whining was the only response I got to my command for someone else to clean up after the dog so I could put an end to my technological Armageddon.

It was too much. Coming too fast. The perfect storm. And though I'd promised myself over and over and over I wouldn't explode, I did.

"Never, never, never will a child in this house ever be allowed to touch my computer! And if this dog throw-up isn't cleaned up by the time I walk back into my room, I'm giving the dog away!"

There would be no Proverbs 31-ish award given to me that night.
No kids to rise and call me blessed.

No husband bragging about me at the city gates.

No laughing at the days to come.

Indeed, nothing but tears and regret. Big, huge piles of regret. And dog throw-up. And a broken computer. And a psychotic cell phone.

I went to bed feeling like a cloud of yuck had wrapped itself

around my head. There was no tidy ending to that day. No redeeming moment. No epiphany that rushed into my conscience and showed me how to fix it all. Just more stuff on my already overwhelming to-do list.

The next day I went to see one of those really smart computer guys, hoping to hear he could push one simple button and all would be well with my computer, my phone, and my dog. Call me Pollyanna.

In the end, he knew nothing about cell phones or dogs, and there would be no such thing as a one-button fix for my computer. The entire operating system on my laptop had been corrupted. However, he was able to retrieve most of what was stored on the hard drive. He downloaded it to an external hard drive, which he then copied over to a new computer. A new computer that cost me money I hadn't planned on spending.

I was relieved to have a working computer again but annoyed that all of this had happened in the first place. Until . . .

One month later my new computer was stolen. I know. Hard to believe, but oh so painfully true.

Tearfully, I called the same smart computer guy. Against all hope and reason, I wanted to know if he still had my old virus-corrupted computer so I could once again retrieve some data from the hard drive. He confirmed my fears—the computer had been trashed. But he also reminded me of the external hard drive he used for the transfer. I suddenly saw that original computer virus as one of the greatest things that had ever happened to me. It forced me to back up my entire computer on an external hard drive. This external hard drive was a great gift to have on the day when my new computer vanished. Had my computer never gotten that virus, I would never have taken the time to back up my computer. The virus that once seemed like a curse became a precious gift. Actually, it became a gift in more ways than one.

In that moment, I caught a glimpse of how crucial perspective is. In the midst of my latest computer tragedy, I stayed calm! It was a rare and empowering feeling. We'll talk a lot throughout this book about changing our perspective because perspective is a key to not coming unglued. For me, perspective doesn't just help me see the current circumstance I'm facing from a new vantage point—it also helps me process future things I face in a calmer, more grounded way. It helps me develop a new way of thinking. And this isn't just some theory I've observed in my life. It's actually the way God wired us.

Changing Our Thought Patterns

Brain research shows that every conscious thought we have is recorded on our internal hard drive known as the cerebral cortex. Each thought scratches the surface much like an Etch A Sketch. When we have the same thought again, the line of the original thought is deepened, causing what's called a memory trace. With each repetition the trace goes deeper and deeper, forming and embedding a pattern of thought. When an emotion is tied to this thought pattern, the memory trace grows exponentially stronger.

Renewing our minds with new thoughts is crucial. New thoughts come from new perspectives.

We forget most of our random thoughts that are not tied to an emotion. However, we retain the ones we think often that have an emotion tied to them. For example, if we've thought over and over that we are "unglued," and if that thought is tied to a strong emotion, we deepen the memory trace when we repeatedly access that thought. The same is true if we decide to stuff a thought—we'll perpetuate that stuffing. Or, if we yell, we'll keep yelling.

We won't develop new responses until we develop new thoughts. That's why renewing our minds with new thoughts is crucial. New thoughts come from new perspectives. The Bible encourages this

process, which only makes sense because God created the human mind and understands better than anyone how it functions.

A foundational teaching of Scripture is that it is possible to be completely changed through transformed thought patterns:

Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will. (Romans 12:2)

Scripture also teaches that we can accept or refuse thoughts. Instead of being held hostage by old thought patterns, we can actually capture our thoughts and allow the power of Christ's truth to change them:

We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ. (2 Corinthians 10:5)

I don't know about you, but understanding how my brain is designed makes these verses come alive in a whole new way for me. Taking thoughts captive and being transformed by thinking new ways isn't some New Age form of mind control. It's biblical and it's fitting with how God wired our brains. I can't control the things that happen to me each day, but I can control how I think about them. I can say to myself, "I have a choice to have destructive thoughts or constructive thoughts right now. I can wallow in what's wrong and make things worse, or I can ask God for a better perspective to help me *see* good even when I don't *feel* good." Indeed, when we gain new perspectives, we can see new ways of thinking.

Perspective taught me a valuable lesson through my computer debacle:

*I can face things that are out of my control
and not act out of control.*

Acting out of control only adds to my troubles. Gosh, I've done this time and time again. However, with the computer, I realized getting in a tizzy about it fixed nothing. It just added more stress and anxiety to an already tense situation. Yes, I can face things that are out of my control and not act out of control. This would be my new thought. This would be my new memory trace.

I can face things This would be my new pattern.

that are out But I couldn't just say it or think it. I had to
of my control believe it. And in order to believe it, I had to
and not act out settle a matter of trust in my heart. *Could I trust*
of control. *God and believe that He is working out something*
good even from things that seem no good? You see,

if I know there is potential good hidden within each chaotic situation, I can loosen my grip on control.

It's easier to loosen my grip when I can see the good. When I can't immediately see the good, loosening my grip becomes a matter of trust. Either way, as long as I believe—really believe—God is there and that He is out to do me good, I can stop freaking out trying to fix everything on my own. I can rest in the fact that God is in control. Which means I can face things that are out of my control and not act out of control.

Yes, this is a hard lesson to learn. But it's crucial.

Joshua's Question

Joshua had to learn how to deal with something out of his control without losing control when facing the impenetrable walls of Jericho. This is a pretty popular Bible story. But before you start skipping pages here thinking, "Been there, done that," wait! There's a little part of this story I hadn't discovered until recently. And I believe what happened to Joshua just before he gave his army their marching orders is one of the most significant lessons of the whole account.

It's a lesson wrapped up in a question Joshua asked. A question that reveals a great deal about Joshua's thought life—and a question we would be wise to ask ourselves. A crucial question. But before we get to the question, it's important to have a clear understanding of the context.

God instructed Joshua to lead the Israelites to capture the city of Jericho. But there was a problem. Jericho was protected by a massive wall that encircled the entire city.

I got a sense of what a walled-in city looks like when I visited the Vatican in Rome this summer. It was astounding. I stood at the base of this wall stretching several stories tall and thought of Joshua and what it must have felt like for him to stand at the wall of Jericho, which was higher still. And I felt the weight of the impossible.

If you were Joshua trying to formulate your battle plan, you'd see that Jericho itself was built on a hill, surrounded by an embankment, and encircled with a fifteen-foot stone retaining wall. On top of this retaining wall you'd see another mud brick wall that was six feet thick and twenty-five feet tall. That wall alone would be pretty intimidating, but it wasn't the only fortification you'd have to overcome. Surrounding this wall was yet another wall of similar size, approximately forty-five feet above ground level. Standing at the base of the outermost retaining wall, it would appear to you that the two walls together were over seventy feet tall. Without a doubt, this fortification would be impossible for the Israelites to overcome on their own.¹

Think about looking at those walls, feeling the weight of the task before you, and knowing you will have to announce to your people a plan that in human reasoning makes absolutely no sense at all. Here is how the Bible describes it:

Now Jericho was tightly shut up because of the Israelites. No one went out and no one came in. Then the LORD said to

Joshua, “See, I have delivered Jericho into your hands, along with its king and its fighting men. March around the city once with all the armed men. Do this for six days. Have seven priests carry trumpets of rams’ horns in front of the ark. On the seventh day, march around the city seven times, with the priests blowing the trumpets. When you hear them sound a long blast on the trumpets, have all the people give a loud shout; then the wall of the city will collapse and the people will go up, every man straight in.” (Joshua 6:1–5 NIV 1984)

That’s it?

That’s what he’s going to tell the people whose forefathers had seen the walls and reported at Kadesh Barnea that the cities of Canaan were “large, with walls up to the sky” (Deuteronomy 1:28)?

Can you imagine the tweets, blog posts, and breaking news reports? Joshua is going to march around the city once a day for six days straight and then seven more times on the seventh day while toot-toot-tooting some horns. After marching and tooting, the people will shout and the walls—the huge, impossible, impenetrable walls of Jericho—will fall. Simply fall. The end.

If ever there were a moment for Joshua to feel overwhelmed at facing a situation totally out of his control, this would have been it. The plan was crazy. Short of a miraculous intervention from God, it wouldn’t work. Joshua would be shamed. His people would be defeated. And to those who didn’t believe, the God of Israel would be revealed as nothing more than a figment of Joshua’s overactive imagination.

Talk about pressure.

But this is all part of the story with which you’re probably familiar. Where’s the little part that’s less known? Less talked about? Less preached about? Where’s the significant question I mentioned?

It’s at the end of Joshua 5 when Joshua goes out to look at the walls before receiving his marching orders from the Lord.

There he is. And there the wall is.

Despite Joshua's long military experience, he had never led an attack on a fortified city that was so well prepared for a long siege. In fact, of all the walled cities in Canaan, Jericho was probably the most invincible. There was also the question of armaments. Israel's army had no siege engines, no battering rams, and no catapults. Their only weapons were slingshots, arrows, and spears — which were like straw toys against the walls of Jericho. Yet Joshua knew the battle of Jericho must be won because, having crossed the Jordan River, Israel's troops had no place to which they could retreat. Further, they could not bypass the city because that would leave their women, children, animals, and goods at Gilgal vulnerable to certain destruction.²

Pondering these heavy thoughts, Joshua is suddenly confronted by a man with a drawn sword. Scripture reveals that this is no mere human but “the commander of the army of the LORD” (Joshua 5:14) — God's presence in human form. Seeing that the man is ready for battle, Joshua asked, “Are you for us or for our enemies?” (Joshua 5:13).

Wrapped in this question we see a hesitancy in Joshua — a peek inside his thought life — a need for reassurance. Such an honest question, but one that makes me feel Joshua isn't walking in complete confidence and assurance. If he were, he wouldn't have asked. But he did. And this is where we assume that, of course God's presence will answer, “Joshua, I am with you, for you, and on your side!”

But we would assume wrong.

When asked, “Are you for us or for our enemies?” the presence of God says, “Neither.”

Why?

Because Joshua has asked the wrong question of the wrong person. The question that needed to be asked and answered wasn't whose side God was on. The real question was one Joshua should have asked himself:

“Whose side am I on?”

The same goes for us. When faced with a situation out of our control, we need to ask, “Whose side am I on?” Will our response reflect that we are on God’s side or not? If we determine that, no matter what, we’re on God’s side, it settles the trust issue in our hearts. And if we ground ourselves in the reality that we trust God, we can face circumstances that are out of our control without acting out of control. We can’t always fix our circumstances, but we can fix our minds on God. We can do that.

We can’t always fix our circumstances, but we can fix our minds on God.

Joshua did it.

The seven priests carrying the seven trumpets went forward, marching before the ark of the LORD and blowing the trumpets. The armed men went ahead of them and the rear guard followed the ark of the LORD, while the trumpets kept sounding. So on the second day they marched around the city once and returned to the camp. They did this for six days. On the seventh day, they got up at daybreak and marched around the city seven times in the same manner, except that on that day they circled the city seven times. The seventh time around, when the priests sounded the trumpet blast, Joshua commanded the people, “Shout! For the LORD has given you the city!” (Joshua 6:13–16 NIV 1984)

With that, the walls of Jericho came crashing down. They were impossible no more.

I like the thought of *impossible* being erased from my vocabulary. Especially when it comes to my struggles with feeling unglued. I am on God’s side. I can reflect that in my actions and reactions. I can face things out of my control without acting out of control.

One Good Choice

That night while I was waiting for the smart computer guy to upload my external hard drive onto another laptop, my daughter Ashley and I ran across the street to the mall. The mall — with all the crowds and chaotic pull of store after store trying to get me to buy, buy, buy — isn't my favorite place. But in the midst of it all, my daughter looked up at me and said, "You know what I really like about you? You're not a freak-out woman when bad things happen."

I wanted to cry.

Because the reality is I have been a freak-out woman way too many times. And I hate that. But somehow, the one good choice not to freak out about my computer being stolen transformed my daughter's perception. It redefined my trajectory. One good choice. Imperfect progress.

If it took sacrificing my laptop to have that one experience with Ashley, I would gladly give up my computer all over again. (Note to Jesus: *I'm certainly not suggesting that. Honestly, I think I have learned this lesson and have no need to replace my computer again for a good long while.*)

I can face things that are out of my control and not act out of control.

I am not a freak-out woman.