



Crazy Kid Moments

**10 Things Kids Taught Me About Life,
God, and Living the Adventure**



By Marlo Schalesky

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

The Big Scream_____	3
A Few Inches of Water_____	6
Catching a Glimpse of God_____	9
God Made Banana Slugs Too_____	12
Learning to Stand_____	15
Lessons from the Log Ride_____	18
Pickles or Peppers_____	21
Pictures on the Frig_____	24
Life as Pieces of the Puzzle_____	27
Making Music With the Master_____	30

The Big Scream

A shriek pierced the air. Then another. And another.

A chill shot through me. I dropped the papers in my hand and bolted for the door.

Another scream sliced across my nerves as I sprinted down the hill toward the plastic kiddie pool where my three-year-old daughter was playing with her Daddy. I spotted her taut-as-a-bow-string body standing next to the pool. She turned her red, scrunched-up face in my direction and let out another howl.

My husband, Bryan, sat in a chair next to the pool with his arms crossed. White spots shone on his arms where his fingers pressed into his biceps.

I slowed. This didn't look like the near-death, blood-everywhere, broken-bones, 9-1-1 emergency that I was expecting. Instead, it looked like a certain little girl was having a fit.

"Hey, what's going on here?" My voice barely carried over Bria's shrill cries. "Did she get hurt?"

Bryan turned toward me. His eyebrows bunched together in a frown. "No." The words came out like a flat stone hitting water.

"No? But —" I gestured toward Miss Blotchy-Red-Face who was now taking a ragged breath.

Bryan sighed. "You're not going to believe this." He pointed to the small rectangular bandage on her thigh. The plastic strip was dangling from the "owie spot" where she'd gotten an immunization two days before. "I told her we needed to take that bandage off."

Bryan had hardly finished the sentence when Bria started up again.

“Noooooooo,” she wailed, “doooooooooon’t.”

I turned to Bria, but before I could say a word, she clenched both fists and threw back her head. “I don’t waaaant to take it off. It’s gonna h-h-huuuuurt.”

“It’s half off already.”

“Noooo, noooo, noooo . . .”

Bryan threw his hands up in the air. “I’ve had it.” He thrust himself from the chair and tromped toward the garage. “You sit with her.”

I settled into the chair and grabbed Bria’s towel. “So, I guess you’re done in the pool, huh?”

Two sniffs, then her arm wiped across her nose. “No.”

I raised my eyebrows.

She jumped back into the pool.

A few minutes later I spotted the bandage floating on water’s surface. I hid my smile. “Hey Bria, how ‘bout we take off that band-aid now?”

“Aaaa,” she began, then looked down. Her cry stopped abruptly. “Where is it?”

I pointed to the pale pink strip. “Guess it didn’t hurt so much after all.”

She poked at the bandage with her toe. “It came off.”

“Yep.”

“I didn’t feel it, though.”

“Nope.”

She studied the bandage for a moment then plopped down and starting playing with her bucket.

As I watched her, I began to chuckle. All that fuss for nothing. But I guess I'm no different. Often for me, too, the anticipation of pain is more than the reality.

Because God is a good father, He, too, wants to remove the bandages in my life, those things I use to hide old pain. He asks me to open up, to be vulnerable to Him and others. But even though I may not holler as shrilly as Bria, in my heart I still often cry, "Nooo. It's gonna huuuurt."

Yet, God continues to call me to truth rather than hiddenness. In fact, the Greek word for "truth" in the New Testament has the same root as "unhidden." And so, I think about that bandage floating on the water's surface and wonder if God's simply trying to tell me that if I trust him and open up, I'll find that it doesn't hurt so much after all. I'll find that God can and has healed my owies. And now, it's time to trust, to risk, and to try something new.

So, these days when God asks me to take off the bandages in my life, I'm trying not to fuss too much. Instead, I pray, "Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting." (Psalm 139:23-24, NIV)

A Few Inches of Water

Sometimes parents are right. This was one of those times.

Joelle paddled around the shallow end of the pool with a long, skinny floater tucked under her arms. She made a few circles then headed for the far end of the pool.

I watched her go. Past the ladder, past her sisters, past the light that marked the end of the area where she was allowed to swim. “Don’t go in the deep end!” I called out the warning after her. “Stay where you can touch bottom.”

She didn’t turn.

“Joelle!”

I started to go after her.

My husband, Bryan, touched my arm. “Give her a minute. She’ll learn.”

Joelle glanced back at me. “I’ll be all right, Mommy. I’ve got my floatie.”

“You could let go of it, and it would float away.”

She turned back around away. “I won’t. I promise.”

“Stay out of the deep end.”

But of course she didn’t. Soon after, the floatie had drifted off and there was Joelle, floundering, gasping, sputtering in the deep end of the pool. Arms flailed, water splashed. And the floatie moved even further from her reach.

Bryan shook his head and went after her. A moment later, he’d hauled her back to the shallow end.

Joelle trembled, and wailed, and hung on to her Daddy.

He sighed. “Well, what did Mommy tell you?”

“Waaaaa!” She buried her head deeper in his neck and refused to look.

He loosened her grip from around him and placed a finger under her chin.

“You’re all right. Next time listen to Mommy.”

She sniffed and nodded. “I was s-s-s-scared.”

Bryan smiled at her. “I know. Now, let’s practice how to float, in case that ever happens again.”

So they did. They practiced being still, letting her body float at the top of the water, and raising her head above the surface to breathe. No flailing, no panic.

The strange thing is, bodies are buoyant. Yet people still drown with their noses a couple inches from air. Joelle had gasped and thrashed when all she really needed to do was calm down, stop flailing, and raise her face above the level of the water.

She only had to lift her chin and look up.

I wonder if it’s not often like that in life as well. We do something foolish, and we start to drown in our mistakes. But God doesn’t abandon us. He’s given us what we need to float. We just have to listen when he says to “Be still, and know that I am God.” (Psalm 46:10, NIV) All we’d really have to do is look up, look to Him, and we’d find our head above water. We’d be okay.

But instead we panic. We flail about in fear and desperation. And all the while God is swimming toward us, calling out to us to just look up.

The Bible says in Psalm 121 (NIV), “I lift up my eyes to the hills-- where does my help come from? My help comes from the LORD, the Maker of heaven

and earth... The LORD watches over you ... The LORD will keep you from all harm. He will watch over your life; the LORD will watch over your coming and going both now and forevermore.”

God is not far. There’s no need to panic. Instead, we just need to be still and look to Him.

So, next time I feel the waters rising, next time I find myself flailing around in fear, I hope to remember the lesson of Joelle’s trip to the deep end. I hope to remember to stop panicking, look up, and breathe in the peace of God. Because my Father in heaven is there with me. He won’t let me drown. He’s given me what I need to stay afloat in all the circumstances of life.

Catching a Glimpse of God

Everyone says God is found in silence. I've discovered that sometimes he's in the chaos too. For me, that's a good thing, because with five little kids, chaos is plentiful at my house.

It was especially so one Friday afternoon not too long ago. Disasters abounded. One kid had tumbled down the stairs and clunked her head earlier that day, then she skinned her knees on the pavement, another fell off her bike and broke the fall with her face (good thing two of her teeth had already fallen out the night before), the other wet her pants, twice, and the oldest needed help with some tangles in her hair. Meanwhile, the dryer had just buzzed, the phone was ringing, and my parents were coming for the weekend, so I really needed to clean house and make the bed they'd be sleeping in.

I finished feeding the baby, then plopped him into his playpen with his toys. Next, I went about doing all the things a mom has to do – kisses and bandages, dishes and laundry, bills and hair brushing, picking up messages (I never did get to the phone in time to answer it), making beds, and rubbing antibiotic ointment on a variety of “owies.”

Meanwhile, the baby chewed his rubber duckie, rattled his toy rattle, squeaked his bear, and pushed the button to make his stuffed dog sing the ABC song. As I passed by his playpen once, twice, three times, I began to notice something. Every time he caught a glimpse of me, he looked up, grinned, clapped his hands and raised his arms.

The third time he did it, I had to stop, because something about his actions reminded me of God, reminded me of worship, of clapping to a song, of raising my hands in praise.

Baby Jayden was in his little playpen world, busy with his little baby toys. And yet, he was watching too, waiting, eager for a glimpse of the one who loved him, provided for his needs, and kept him safe. He wasn't too busy to keep watch, and when he saw me, to giggle and raise his hands.

I paused and picked him up.

He laughed and clapped his hands some more.

That was when I knew I needed to be a lot more like him. In the midst of all my busyness, I needed to also keep watch for the One who provides, protects, and loves. I needed to keep an eye out for God working around me. Only that would make me happy enough to clap my hands and raise my arms. Folded laundry, bandaged owies, a vacuumed floor – all were necessary, but none filled my heart with delight. If I wanted to be as happy as baby Jayden, I needed to put myself in a position to see God's glory, whenever he passed by. I needed to be like Moses in Exodus 33:18-23 (NIV):

“Then Moses said, ‘Now show me your glory.’ And the LORD said, ‘I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you, and I will proclaim my name, the LORD, in your presence ...’ Then the LORD said, ‘There is a place near me where you may stand on a rock. When my glory passes by, I will put you in a cleft in the rock and cover you with my hand until I have passed by. Then I will remove my hand and you will see my back... ’”

All Moses wanted was God's presence, was a glimpse of his glory. And God put him in a position to see just that, much like I'd placed Jayden in the playpen where he could see me too. But both Moses and Jayden had to watch.

And just like them, I had to learn to watch too, to pay attention to what God might be doing when I'm in my little playpen-world, with my toys and trials, tears and limitations. No matter what I'm doing, how much chaos surrounds me, how many boo-boo's need bandaging, I need to still be watching for God to pass by. And when I spy Him, I can throw up my hands, grin, and giggle with delight, because nothing makes me happier than catching a glimpse of God at work around me.

And that's what I hope I'll remember when the next disaster occurs.

God Made Banana Slugs Too

Slim rays of sunlight slanted through the pine trees to illuminate our picnic table. Clad in shiny red and white checkered vinyl, the table held wonders that would make any mouth water – fun finger sandwiches, nacho cheese tortilla chips, salsa, crispy potato chips with ranch dip, juicy orange cantaloupe, bubbly soda pop, and, of course, the traditional macaroni salad. A fat squirrel waddled to the edge of the table, his nose crinkling as he sniffed the air. He was ready to eat, and so were we. All of us, except . . . I glanced around. Where were the kids?

In a moment, I spotted them behind a tree– three small bodies squatting in a tight circle, their heads bent over something on the ground. Occasional “ooo” and “ahh” sounds rose from the group. Jacob, the oldest at age six, whispered something in his youngest sister’s ear. Jessica, age two, rocked back, then forward again, on her heels. I could hear her giggle.

I opened my mouth to call them to lunch, but before I could, Nichole squealed. “Look, look, it moved!”

“Don’t touch it!” Jacob hollered at his other sister.

“I’m not touching it,” Nichole hollered back.

About that time, I figured I should intervene. “Hey, it’s time to pray and eat,” I called. “Come on.”

None of the children moved.

“Hurry up.”

Finally, Jacob turned. His eyes, round with excitement, caught mine. “You’ve gotta see this.” He motioned with one hand before his head again bent over the object in the dirt.

“Oh, all right,” I muttered, sure I would see nothing more than some nasty little beetle or furry brown caterpillar. As I approached, heads parted just enough for me to look through. But I didn’t see a beetle or a caterpillar. There, crawling over a fallen branch, was a bright yellow, slimy banana slug. It was six inches long, as fat as a sausage, and as far as I was concerned, absolutely disgusting.

All three kids spoke at once. “Isn’t it the greatest?” “It looks just like a banana.” “Can we take it home?”

“Ugh.” I shuddered. “That awful thing?” I backed away.

Suddenly, Nichole stood up and pinned me with her gaze. “Did God make banana slugs too?” Her question penetrated me like a doctor’s scalpel.

I looked at Nichole. She looked back at me. I dropped my gaze first, my face flushing. “Yes, of course,” I stammered. “God made banana slugs too.”

Nichole didn’t say another word. She didn’t have to. I was convicted. Where I had seen something slimy and disgusting, Nichole saw a special creation of God.

Slowly, I took a deep breath and leaned over the slug again. *A special creation of God*, I reminded myself. After a few minutes of looking, I’d decided it

wasn't so bad. Though a bit gooey, the slug was a rather nice shade of yellow. And it did look remarkably like a banana.

I smiled and shook my head, wondering where else my vision had been skewed. I had to admit there were some other banana slugs in my life. I thought of a woman at work who smoked and wore her skirts too short. Hadn't I labeled her "slimy" in my mind and sought to avoid her? And what about that man at the grocery store last week who needed a shower? I hadn't called him disgusting, but I'd sure treated him as if he was.

What if I began looking at these people through child's eyes? What if I took the time to really see them as unique and valuable creations of God? If Jacob, Nichole, and Jessica could find something admirable in that banana slug, I could find something special about these people too.

Over the next few months, I tried the banana slug theory, and sure enough, I soon began to see neat qualities in people I'd formerly avoided. The woman at work had a witty sense of humor. The guy at the grocery store had an infectious grin. A neighbor I'd disliked turned out to be wonderful cook.

Slowly, I discovered that God delights in all His creations. And I should too . . . even the banana slugs.

Learning to Stand

I held my breath and watched as Jayden struggled to pull himself up using the planter in my office. At eight months old, he was determined to master the art of standing.

For him, it didn't matter that just that morning he'd fallen twice, hit his face on the floor both times, and given himself a fat lip. He'd cried loud and hard each time, but after a few moments, he was back at it again. Working, stretching, striving to do more, to stand longer, to see beyond what could be seen from all fours. He was indomitable in his desire to see his world from new heights.

So, he pulled, he grunted, he wobbled, he swayed. And finally, he did it. He stood tall and straight with his hands grasping the edge of the planter. Then, he turned and grinned at me before plopping back to the floor. I clapped and leaned back as he crawled to the bookcase, grabbed the bottom shelf, and strained to stand again. And again. And again.

For an hour he puttered around my office, working to pull himself up on everything he could reach. Meanwhile, I sat at my desk and worked too. Except I was working to pull out the right words to answer emails from a few difficult people in my life. He strained, I strained. He groaned, I groaned. I almost gave up. He never did.

I stared at my computer screen, not wanting to reach out again, try again, love again. But Jayden showed me I was wrong.

I rested my fingers on the keyboard and glanced back as he balanced against the trash can. Just the week before, he'd been happy swinging in his

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baby swing or jumping in his bouncer. But now those things weren't enough. Instead, he wanted to grunt and grin, struggle and stand. And next, he turned to tackle the stairs.

As I watched him, I learned something important about myself and about God. Jayden wanted to go more places, do more things, explore and stretch his newfound abilities. Even when it hurt, even when he failed, even when he wobbled and fell. He didn't care, because when he stood, he could see things, touch things, feel things that he never could experience if he stayed on the ground. At eight months old, he knew that pain and failure shouldn't stop him.

By watching him, I realized that it shouldn't stop me either. Just because I've loved and been hurt, doesn't mean I should be reluctant to love again. Just because I'd reached out and failed, shouldn't mean I don't reach out again. God wants me to keep trying, keep reaching, keep struggling to do what's right. Yet, too often, I let past pain hold me back from trying more, stretching, and pushing the limits of my faith. I worry about being hurt again and forgot the wonder of finding new freedom in being like Christ.

2 Timothy 1:7 (NIV) says, "For God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline." In the verse before, Paul urges Timothy to "fan into flame the gift of God" – not to shrink back, but to push forward to allow the fire to grow within him.

So, as Jayden stretched his arms to the second step and bent his knee to climb one more stair, he reminded me that I, too, want to be persistent in my walk with God. I want to be stretching, growing, trying to be more like Him every day.

And that means choosing to love, choosing to reach out, choosing to give. And when I get a fat lip, I ought to just have a good cry, then keep on pushing forward in the things that God would have me do. Only when I love like Him, even after being hurt, can I see new things, touch new horizons, reach the new heights He has planned for me.

These days, as I watch Jayden just starting to let go of the planter and take a few steps on his own, I find his relentless desire for growth still challenges me to forget past hurt and press on to follow God more fully, no matter how many fat lips I might get in the process.

Lessons from the Log Ride

The creak of the ferris wheel called petulantly to the seagulls as we walked down the Santa Cruz Beach Boardwalk. Sweat trickled down my forehead to make a damp trail on the side of my face. I squinted into the hot California sun. Another 100 degree day in September. I still wasn't used to it.

Earlier that day, Christy had turned up her innocent six-year-old face and pleaded to go to the Boardwalk. So, we forsook the comfort of air conditioning to brave the tortures of sun and surf.

The Boardwalk teemed with people in swimsuits and sunglasses. I squeezed Christy's hand and brushed her hair back with my fingertips. She was as hot as I was. "Just a few more minutes," I assured her, "and we'll be there."

Within moments, we reached the ride we had all been looking forward to – Logger's Run. I shaded my eyes from the glare as I looked at the twisting trail of canals far above. With a shriek of pure joy, the kids in one of the plastic logs plummeted to the end of the ride. Splash! Sunlight danced off droplets of water like a thousand tiny diamonds.

I smiled. Christy would love this ride. The water, the logs, the bumping along in bright blue channels, the final plunge, the big splash . . . it was just the type of thrill that suited her.

"Here we are. The log ride," I said. "Are you ready for some fun, Christy?"

To my surprise, she answered, "No!"

"What's the matter?" I asked.

"I don't wanna go." She crossed her arms and pushed out her lower lip.

"But this is the kind of ride you like the best."

"I don't wanna go." She stomped her foot and gave me that "I need a spanking' look.

“Fine,” I muttered. “we’ll sit here on the bench and wait while everyone else goes on the ride.”

She glared at me, walked over to the bench, and sat down.

What had gotten into her? The heat? The fear of something new? I watched the others get in line. It didn’t make sense. The ride would cool her down, and she knew that I would be right there with her if she became afraid. Besides that, it was fun!

I shook my head and let a frown creep over my face. We had come to the Boardwalk because Christy had asked. Now she sat on the bench, in the blistering sun, and refused to enjoy the best ride of all. It was crazy.

I opened my mouth to blast her with my opinion, but God stopped me. I looked down at her, her brow still furrowed in stubborn rejection.

Was Christy a bit too much like me? Did I sometimes make that same surly face to God? I remembered a gentle urging to talk to my neighbor about Jesus. I hadn’t done it. And last spring I thought I might start a new Bible study in my neighborhood. But the heat of life and the fear of the unknown had stopped me. Had I refused the best ride in my spiritual life?

God often asked me to plunge forward with what He wanted for me, to take a risk, to try something new with Him. But, my tendency was to hang back, to sit on the bench while others enjoyed the ride.

Perhaps the uncomfortable things that God was calling me to do would actually refresh me, and be a lot of fun besides. I knew, too, that God would be with me the entire time, right there holding me tight as I bumped along the channel of His will. What had I been missing by my reluctance to do something new and join Him on the “Logger’s Run” in my life?

“There they are.” Christy’s words startled me. Sure enough. The others had finished the ride. They came laughing down the steps, their shirts wet, their hair dripping.

“That was great!” Bryan strode over to us with a grim still spread across his face. “You guys should have come.”

I smiled up at him. Yes, we should have. And from now on, I would.

In the heat of everyday life, I couldn’t afford to miss any more log rides with God.

Pickles or Peppers?

The room was crowded and the night sweltering as we took our extended family to Chevy's Mexican Restaurant. Conversations swirled around us while we perused the brightly colored menus.

"Enchiladas, tacos, burritos?" Bryan handed pointed to pictures of each.

Beside him, our three-year-old daughter, Jayna, wiggled in her seat. "I don't like burritos." She scowled.

"How about fajitas? We'll all share."

"Fajitas." Jayna rolled the word on her tongue and grinned.

Bryan smiled back. "Fajitas it is, then."

In a few minutes we ordered, and before long, a sizzling platter of chicken fajitas was placed before us with a mound of sour cream and guacamole heaped to one side. And there, perched high and proud on the top of the pico de gallo, was an enormous jalepeno pepper.

Jayna's eyes lit up as she saw it. Soon, her hand reached across the table to grasp the pepper in her fist. "Pickle!" A huge smile spread over her face.

I gasped. "No, no, Jayna. It's not a pickle. Here, give it to me." I reached over and tried to pry the vegetable from her grip.

Immediately, she shrieked her disapproval. "Pickle! Mine!"

"Listen to me." I attempted to remain calm. "That is a jalepeno pepper. It's very hot. You'll burn your mouth if you eat it."

Her forehead furrowed in consternation. Jayna loved pickles. And, to her young eyes, the pepper must have looked an awful lot like her favorite kind.

"It's very hot," I repeated.

In a fraction of a second she made up her mind. She knew better than I did. It was a pickle. So, with one swift movement, she shoved the pepper into her mouth and bit down.

"No!"

Too late. The deed was done. A moment later, Jayna's eyes watered and her face turned red. She spat out the pepper. "Waa! Hot!" she hollered as her hand grabbed for the closest water glass in sight.

Gulp, gulp, gulp, she guzzled down the water. But her eyes still watered. Her face was still red. "H-h-hot!" She sniffed. "Make it stop burning."

I sighed. It was too late for my help. Now, she had to suffer the consequences of disobedience. Even though she was sorry, even though she repented, that didn't make the pain disappear.

As I watched Jayna gulp down another glass of water, I wondered how often I made the same mistake as her. Sin, I realized, is a lot like a jalepeno pepper. Sometimes it looks good, like a sweet, juicy pickle. But watch out! It burns when you bite into it.

I reached over and picked up the remains of the discarded pepper. I turned it over in my hand and was reminded of Deuteronomy 5:29 where God laments, "Oh, that their hearts would be inclined to fear me and keep all my commands always, so that it might go well with them and their children forever!" (NIV) Just like I warned Jayna, God warns me against sin, too. Not because He wants to keep me from the "good stuff," but so that I won't get burned, so my life

will go well. He knows that sin will always hurt me, no matter how harmless it may seem at the time.

In my imagination, I could see God sitting across the table from me, saying, “No, Marlo, sin’s not a pickle. It might look good, but it will burn you and make you miserable if you bite into it.” Lying, lusting, angry outbursts, foolish words, all seem so appealing at the moment of temptation. “Just a little taste,” I think. But looks are deceiving. One nibble, and it’s “WAAA, where’s the water?!” Through God’s grace, I can be forgiven, but, just like Jayna, I still must endure the painful consequences.

These days, when faced with temptation, I remind myself of Jayna’s face, all red and wrinkled up as she grabbed for the water glass. Then, I tell myself again sin is not a sweet pickle, it’s a hot jalepeno pepper.

Pictures on the Frig

I'd heard it a dozen times before. "Give your life to God! Surrender!" And that Sunday, the message our pastor proclaimed was no different. I leaned back and thought about how glad I was that I *had* given myself to God and how I wanted to make my life a gift to him every day. But then, something new struck me, something I hadn't dwelt on before.

I thought about the songs we'd sung earlier – songs about the grandness of the God of the universe, about His majesty, His holiness, the wonder of His presence. And as I thought about the glory of God, the value of my one, puny, rather unimpressive life seemed like a poor gift indeed. After all, I was no Billy Graham, no President of the United States, no great mover-and-shaker of the world around me. I was just plain ol' me, with no extraordinary accomplishments, no fancy resume, nothing to make my life seem a worthy gift to so great a God. Did God really care if I gave my life to him? Did it really matter after all?

My thoughts troubled me as the service ended and I slipped out to pick up my nearly-three-year-old daughter from Sunday School. A dozen small bodies wiggled from the classroom and darted down the hall toward me. Among them was Bethany. As soon as she saw me, she let out a squeal and waved a piece of yellow construction paper over her head.

"Mommy, mommy, look!" she cried as she hurled herself toward me.

The other kids rushed past like a river at flood-stage. Bethany crashed into my legs, then hugged me around the knees. A moment later, she giggled

and shoved the construction paper into my hands. “For you, Mommy. My make picture for you.”

She smiled up at me with wide eyes framed by curly, wheat-colored hair, and my heart melted. I knelt beside her. “For me?”

“It’s a present.”

I held her close and looked down at the construction paper. Red and blue crayon marks formed lopsided circles that listed off to the right bottom corner of the page. A black smear marred the upper corner, and in the middle a rough outline of Bethany’s handprint started off well, then dropped off to a long squiggle at the pinkie finger.

I pulled Bethany closer and kissed her on the forehead. “I love it!” I proclaimed. And I did. I really did. It was no Monet (Picasso maybe), but to me, it was every bit as precious.

Later that day, I put the picture in the center of the refrigerator door where I could see it every day. I stood back, smiled, then stepped forward to adjust it just right.

I knew, of course, that if someone else were to find the picture lying on the ground, they would think it was just trash. They wouldn’t see it like I did. They would see a piece of cheap paper with crayon scribbles and pen marks. But to me, it was a treasure. I loved the squiggled outline of her little hand. I adored the awkward circles. And one day, when a new picture came to replace the yellow construction paper on the frig, I knew I would put this one away in my

“special things” box, with a tiny date written on the back. Then, in years to come, I’d pull it out, and look at it, and remember.

It was then, as I stood there and admired the picture on the frig that I understood at last what it means to God when I make my life a gift to him. He doesn’t care if I’m a bit off-center, with lopsided circles that droop to one side. He doesn’t care if I’ve never done anything that seems very important. What matters is that I give Him my life as an offering of love. What matters is that God loves me so much that my life, even mine, is precious beyond measure.

My life may never be a Monet, but God still loves to hang my picture on the frig.

Life as Pieces of the Puzzle

“No, Sweetie, that doesn’t go there.” I pointed my finger at the puzzle piece in my two-year-old daughter’s hand.

Joelle studied the bright piece and frowned. Vivid reds and pinks splashed over the cardboard surface. “Flower. Go dere.” She again pushed it into the open space along one side of the puzzle.

“It won’t fit. You’re not ready for that piece yet.”

“Fit. Go dere.” Her brows furrowed as she turned the piece sideways and tried again. Push, turn, shove, turn, stare, frown. And still the piece wouldn’t slide into place.

I tapped my fingers on the table and reached for the puzzle piece.

Joelle hid it against her chest.

I had to admit, it was a beautiful piece. Rose petals shone against the deep green background and created an enticing image of color. But no matter how hard Joelle tried, it wouldn’t fit into spot she had chosen for it.

I watched her struggle for a few more minutes, then searched through the pile for the right piece. I finally found it – a piece covered in shades of ugly brown with dark knobs for the tree trunk. “Here, love, try this one.” I handed her the picture of the brown trunk.

She looked at the piece in my hand, then at the pretty flowers in hers. She pushed my hand away. “No.”

I wiggled my fingers. “This is the one you need.”

“No.” She pointed at my hand. “Yucky.”

I looked down at the piece. She was right. It was yucky compared to the flowers. But it was the piece she needed at this time. The only one that would fit in order to make the picture complete.

The difference was that I had the whole picture in mind, the whole puzzle. She, only the piece in her hand. It took Joelle five full minutes to finally put down the flowered piece and try the one I was holding out to her.

Not that I blamed her. I prefer flowered pieces too. In the picture of my life, I've often tried to shove in the pretty piece – something that looks good, seems appealing. I want success in my career now. I want my relationships to be easy and comfortable. I want my children to always choose what's right, and my health to be excellent.

But sometimes God holds out a piece that isn't nearly so attractive. He calls me to a difficult task, to face failure or fear, to endure a painful situation, or to invest in a relationship that seems to bring only heartache. At those times, the piece He's giving me looks brown, gnarled, and ugly when I want bright and beautiful.

And sometimes, I, too, want to hang on to my idea of how my life should be right now. Sometimes I want to force a pretty piece, one I like better, when God's giving me the less attractive piece because in the end that's the one that will make the picture of my life right.

"For I know the plans I have for you," God tells the people of Israel in Jeremiah 29:11 (NIV), "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future." And the same holds true for me. He knows the plans He

has for me. His plans, not mine. Plans that take into account the whole picture of my life, the picture He is creating especially for me.

So these days, as I watch Joelle put puzzle pieces together, I remind myself that God knows all the pieces of my life, where they fit, and in what order they must be placed.

And when he hands me a piece that isn't all flowers, I need to trust that He sees the whole picture, and one day that picture will be beautiful.

Making Music with the Master

Small brows furrowed in concentration. Small fingers pressed hard on guitar frets. Small thumbs thrummed the strings.

And music filled the room – awkward, off-key, clashing music. But to my mommy-ears, the sounds were sweet. I smiled.

Bethany and Joelle, my two young daughters, were working so hard to learn how to play real music on their brand new kids' guitars. They sat on short stools in front of their dad, with their guitars on their laps and their fingers poised over the strings.

Bryan held his own guitar (adult-sized, of course) and strummed the chord again. A perfect C warbled from his instrument. He paused. "See, like that." The sound died away. "Now you try." He placed the girls' fingers on the proper frets one more time.

The girls studied Daddy's fingers. They glanced at their own, then looked at his again. Then, they took deep breaths, and strummed.

Better. Not good, but at least the sound didn't leave my hair standing on end.

Bryan adjusted their fingers again. First Joelle's, then Bethany's. "Try not to push down the other strings."

Bethany nodded and grinned. "Okay, Daddy." She leaned forward.

Joelle stuck out her tongue to focus.

I hurried for the camera.

They tried it yet again – studying the way Daddy did it, checking their own fingers, and playing the note. Studying, checking, playing. Boldly, joyfully, with Daddy's help.

It wasn't perfect, but each time, the sound improved. By the end, their fingers were dented by the strings, their picks were well worn, and they had almost learned to produce a decent C chord.

But most importantly, they were happy. Glowing. Why? Because they were playing guitar, just like Daddy.

As I stood by and clicked pictures, I was reminded of how God, my father, asks me to imitate Him too. 1 Peter 1:15-16 (NIV), says "But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: 'Be holy, because I am holy.'" And in Matthew 11:29 (NIV), we're told to, "Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart . . ."

I'm called to be like Him, to learn from Him. Doing that, I've come to realize, isn't a whole lot different from my girls learning to play guitar. As God makes beautiful music, He asks me to join in – to try. And though my fingers may be still a little small, and I might bump the wrong strings, still what's important is that I study the way my Daddy does it and try to do the same myself. Study, check, play. Boldly, joyfully, and with my Father in heaven's help.

It doesn't matter if my music isn't always perfect. What matters is that I watch, learn, and try again. That I practice using my instruments like God uses His. The Bible, circumstances in life, popular culture, off-the-cuff comments by acquaintances, friends, or family – how does God make music from these

instruments? How does He work in people's lives? And how can I make music with those same instruments?

The only way to know is to study the Master. Study the gospels. How did Jesus use scripture, culture, circumstances, comments, in the gospel accounts? How does God work in my own life? In the lives of the people I know? We must study, watch, learn, and play.

God is making music all around us. If we pay attention, we can make music too. It may not be perfect. It may a little off-key, a little awkward. But if we practice and watch the master musician – if we allow him to move our fingers along the frets, we too can play the notes of heaven, and bring beautiful music into the lives of those around us.

So, let us play. Joyfully, boldly, with our gaze fixed on the Master who teaches us the proper chords.

Find out more about Marlo and her books at www.marloschalesky.com.”

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