

A black and white photograph of a person standing on a beach, looking out at the ocean under a cloudy sky. The person is in the lower left foreground, silhouetted against the wet sand. The ocean is in the middle ground, with waves breaking. The sky is filled with large, dramatic clouds, with some light breaking through. The overall mood is contemplative and serene.

dancing back to Jesus

post-perfectionist faith in five easy verbs

By Heather Caliri

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Give Up

When I was thirteen, I got the lead role in a biggish professional production of *Annie* in Phoenix. Almost at the beginning of rehearsals, I came down with a cold, which settled in my chest like an un-exorcized spirit.

I took Robatussin and drank aloe Vera juice and goldenseal tea, and smeared Vapo-rub on my chest and tried Ricola and got a humidifier, saw a doctor and was diagnosed with bronchitis, and when the live shows started, I was still sick.

The “run” of a show is apt: it’s tiring. I’m not sure how many shows a week we performed, but I’m guessing it was five or six, with two shows on Saturdays.

I almost made it through all the performances.

Almost.

It was closing night when things fell apart. I arrived arriving at the theater with a carful of chattering orphans early in the day.

I had a secret. I'd woken that morning worse, with my chest raw. And singing songs from *Les Mis* and *Phantom* in the carpool had not helped matters.

I just assumed I'd pull through, like I did every other show. I'd been singing sick for so long it was no longer remarkable.

I put on the wig, got my makeup and costume on. I put a lot of cough drops in my pocket. And then the show started with me center-stage.

A few scenes in to the show is *the* song. "Tomorrow," the anthem of every little girl who wants to star on Broadway in a red wig, is a punishingly hard song for an injured voice. On the very last note—the money note—it happened.

My voice gave out.

I pushed pass the rawness to reach for the pitch, and instead of solid ground, I found—nothing.

I whispered the last three words. The auditorium was gigantic: a space for three thousand people. All of them watched me fail.

I smiled and finished the song without my voice and went off stage, my heart pounding. Someone got me some tea and cough medicine and I came on the next scene.

My voice came back. I did a reprise of “Tomorrow” in the second act without a hitch. I raised my arms and belted it out and the show went on.

I kept going and persevered, and for that I’m proud, but I could not sing in a solo in public again after that night for almost ten years.



This is the place I am in my faith. For too long I have sung the song of believing out of my own strength, past the point any person should be trying to make sounds. I have sung sick, and weak, while my head is telling me to keep going, keep smiling, my hands raised in triumph even as my voice fails.

So no wonder that when I start approaching acts of faith again, my body responds with a sense of dismay.

My heart is telling me to stop. Stop making noise, stop trying. Stop ignoring the fact that I am sick and exhausted. It says that I'm done performing. It tells me to go home and rest. Rest and let someone else take over the performance and effort and the spotlight. Rest and stop worrying about my voice giving out, ever again.

I can't—I simply can't—try anymore on my own strength.

I suspect this is a good place to be. And yet I am profoundly uncomfortable here. I read a spiritual

book and my brain says, “Try,” and I put down the book and shudder because I **can’t**. Even if the book isn’t saying I should do the whole faith thing on my own strength I am like Pavlov’s dog, salivating to try.

I am like a goddamn drunk when it comes to putting a brave face on things and bolting back out into the spotlight.

So right now, my spiritual discipline is giving up.

Here’s what that looks like.

If I start thinking anxious thoughts about some aspect of faith, I stop what I am doing—reading the Bible, praying, reading a Christian book, immediately. As if it were my hand touching a hot stove.

Then I echo Anne Lamott’s classic, complicated prayer: “Help.”

And once I’m ready for something other than “Help,” I do this: I find the “rote” devotionals in the *Book of Common Prayer*, the ones I’ve memorized so I don’t even have to

make the effort to think, and I become a child again, unable to do anything but parrot her parent, and I say back the words I was taught: *Our Father, who art in Heaven, hallowed by thy name, thy kingdom come.*

And then I get to the passage from Matthew, and it says *Come to me, you who labor and are heavy-laden*, I weep, and say *That's me. I'm coming, Jesus. Take me.*

There, in the quiet stillness of my failure I sense Jesus like I never have before.

I'll be honest: I was afraid of failing for a long time. But now that I starting to give up, I am happy with my own weakness, my own crippling, this blessed indolence, because it is a holy rest, with Jesus singing for me.



**Where are you trying right now
with God, with faith, with
spirituality? Could you fail for a
day, and let Him try for you?**

Enjoy

A few years ago, a dear friend of mine suffered a wrenching bout of post-partum depression. I visited her on one of her first days home after hospitalization. She greeted me at the door, the spark gone from her eyes, her usually energetic voice so soft I strained to hear her.

I was surprised to see playing cards set in neat rows on the floor of her living room. I had never seen her play solitaire before. Perhaps my eyes asked a question, because she started gathering them up.

“My therapist suggested doing something I enjoyed. Something frivolous. And this sounded good.” She stacked the brightly colored faces and shapes. “It’s pretty much all I can do right now.”

She sounded apologetic, which broke my heart because of how much I

esteem and respect her. And also because I thought that her finding something to enjoy in those dark days was incredibly brave.

Because that's what enjoyment is. Enjoyment is taking in the whole of this broken world and choosing light. It is finding a spark to celebrate, a piece of art to bring into being. It is acknowledging the things our hearts desire, and choosing a beauty instead of the darkness. Enjoyment is affirming that God created us in His image. That His image is good despite evidence to the contrary.

Here's what I have used to guide my heart—and still do, sometimes:

- What others will think.
- What others want.
- What I “should” do.
- What is safe.
- What hides my shame.
- What is easy.
- What is expected of me.

These guidelines and regulations have such a strong draw for me that often I can't tell what it is that I want. **I can't for the life of me figure out what I'd enjoy if given the chance to request it.**

I realized not that long ago that when I ask my husband to do something for me, I usually frame it as a question about what *he* wants. As in, "*Would you like to watch the kids for an hour while I write?*" or "*Do you want to go out to dinner?*"

It is almost impossible for me to say it this way: *I want to go out to dinner*, or *Would you watch the kids?*

It is not easy to say the things we desire out loud. It is not easy to ask for them, simply, with the expectation that our needs might be met.

Enjoyment requires an honesty that breaks open our hearts.

Here's what my friend was doing as she laid each card on her carpet. She was saying *I will persevere*. She

was saying *I trust you, God*. She was saying *life* and *acceptance* and *faith*. She was affirming that she would choose to get better no matter what it required of her. Those rows of cards in primary colors were the most severe sort of prayer. They were the prayer that comes out of desperation and leads to wholeness.

Lately, when I don't know what to do, when a decision frightens me, when I am afraid of asking too much of those I love or of disappointing them terribly, when I am unsure of my motivations or wondering what God wants, this is my lodestone:

Where is the joy?

Because I believe my God is overflowing with joy. If I can't find Him with my naked soul, joy will be the scent that will send me after him, running headlong in anticipation.



**What is something simple—
even silly—that you enjoy? Go do
it, and invite God in.**

Unmask

When I was getting ready to birth my first daughter, we talked about pain management at birth class. I was preparing for a natural labor, so it was a big topic.

Our birth teacher told us that we should imagine the very worst pain we could think of, and then imagine it worse.

My heart stopped.

Afterwards, I felt angry with her.

Before you start telling me I'm crazy, let me give you some context. A lot of the natural birth books I'd been reading emphasized not dwelling on worst-case scenarios. Not listening to the horror stories that everyone and their mother would offer me.

Educating myself about the reality of birth, sure. But also renewing my ideas about what birth might feel like,

and expecting that it could be, and would be bearable.

Some of the books compare birth to sex (same physical system, same hormones), where focusing on everything that can go wrong can derail the whole process.

I also want to be clear—I do not want to make anyone feel “less-than” for using epidurals. I’m always happy when painkillers help someone along in labor. But I didn’t want them. And given that, I knew I needed to go into the experience believing it was possible to have a joyful experience without horrific pain.

I didn’t like my birth teacher telling me otherwise.

I think this is a pretty apt metaphor for faith in general. If you spend your time only focusing on the negatives of faith—the cynics, the reasons to doubt, the abuses or philosophical conundrums, you will lose sight of why you believe. But if you never acknowledge those things,

refuse to think about the real pain and doubt and brokenness interwoven with belief, you will be deluding yourself.

After that class about pain, I thought for a week about my anger. The next class, I talked to the teacher. She told me she didn't think I necessarily have the worst pain in my life (and just so you know, I didn't) but that she wanted me to be prepared for that possibility.

“I have had too many students come back post-partum and feel like I wasn't honest enough,” she said. “That they weren't prepared for the pain that they did face. Not every birth is back-stabbingly painful, but in my experience, some are. **And the question is: what will you do if it is?**”

I opened my mouth, and then shut it. Because much as I hated to think about the possibility of the worst pain in the world happening to me, I knew she was right.

She gave me homework. List my five biggest fears about the birth. If the fear came true, what would happen? How would I feel? How would I react? She recommended walking through my worst-case scenario step by step, being honest with myself about my options, the emotions I might feel, and what help I might need.

I *hated* doing that exercise. And yet it was profoundly helpful. As I anticipated the pain I might feel, the caesarian that I was afraid of, all the worst-case scenarios I might face, I started thinking about what I could do if they came true. I imagined my mom vacuuming my floor for me if I had a C-section. I imagined sobbing if the pain was more than I could bear. I imagined accepting an epidural if I needed one. I made peace with those possibilities.

And then I went through birth, and knew I was prepared for whatever happened.

It was tremendously empowering.

My question to you is: **have you looked, recently, at the fears and doubts and dark places in your faith?** Have you shoved those worries to the back of your mind? Have you acknowledged your shame? Have you imagined the worst-case scenario, and thought about what help you might draw on if things came to that point?

Have you spoken those fears out loud to anyone? Have you said them to Jesus?

For a long time, my shame was hidden in the parts of my faith that embarrassed me. I was ashamed that I felt tired of the Bible. Tired of sermons and of much of church. Wondering if Jesus really is the only way. Feeling positively sick of evangelism. Not wanting any thing to do with discipleship or discipline.

Really, I was afraid that I might stop being a Christian. I was afraid of what would happen to my friendships and family relationships if I walked away from Jesus.

These thoughts and fears were simply unacceptable to me.

But as I tried to drown all those doubts, I was submerging my faith, too. There was no getting rid of one without killing the other.

I had to choose: would I mentally explore the worst-case scenario? Or would I keep those monsters in the dark, where they would rule my life?

About a year ago, I sat with my friend—my dear, fairly conservative Christian friend--over coffee, and told her I might become a really liberal Christian, the kind that might even seem heretical to her. I told her I was sick of Christianity.

I waited, with my heart pounding, to see if she blinked.

Instead, she nodded, her face concerned, but not concerned for my lack of faith. Concerned for ME. Concerned because she could tell my heart was breaking.

I realized at that moment that I had been wrong. I realized how little I'd expected of this friend. Why had I thought she'd be anything but loving to me?

I had to ask myself: Why had I been so afraid of being honest?

And who else was I selling short by my hiding?

The real answer was Jesus. I was selling Jesus short.

Why had I thought that any part of my faith was unacceptable when Christ came to accept it all, just as I am?

Looking back on that time with my friend, I realize that most of what I was so concerned about was window dressing. At my most "unchristian", I believed that Jesus lived and died to save me. I loved Him and desired to be in fellowship with Him.

No, I was more concerned about not seeming pious enough, theological enough, conservative enough, Christian enough.

You know what? None of that matters a rat's ass.

As Paul says, it's rubbish. That concern about orthodoxy, appearance, being a Good Christian? It is all loss for the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus.

I am realizing how much of my faith I keep hidden, especially the works-in-progress parts, the questioning parts, the tender, doubting parts.

I want to challenge you to uncover those tender places. Say them out loud to Jesus. Say them out loud to yourself. Say them out loud to someone safe. Stand there in your messiness and be honest about your fears. Be honest about the fear of losing your faith, being unacceptable, being a heretic, being a bad Christian.

Jesus is big. Incredibly big. He can handle it.

In *The Message*, Eugene Peterson says that the religion

scholars wondered why Jesus ate with the riff-raff.

Be one of the riff-raff. Join him at the table. He's waiting for you.



What's the question about faith you're afraid to ask out loud? Write it down, and consider sharing it with someone safe—today.

Play

I bought my daughter a child-sized broom for Christmas a few years ago.

At the time, I wondered if it was the worst present ever. Was it the parental equivalent of buying your wife a blender? Would she open it and put hands on her hips, and ask, “What exactly are you trying to say, buster?”

I was relieved when she opened the gift and immediately started sweeping. When she saw me pull out my broom, she’d run and get hers. She also used it as a horse, as a witch’s ride, as a hanging rod for a princess’s closet, as Cinderella’s prop.

And when my youngest got old enough, they fought over who got to use it.

They remind me of a scene in *The Poisonwood Bible*, where Leah is trying to make friends with one of the

village boys. To play, he takes reeds, sticks, and mud, and makes a tiny version of the kind of house everyone in the village lives in. It takes him only a few minutes, but when he's finished, it looks real, solid. And Leah realizes, at that moment, that she has no practical skills like he does, that all of the village play she's seen is serious preparation for adult life.

It's the same thing I observe in my kids, as they go about their days. Their play is preparation. It is practice. It is serious apprenticeship done with joyful urgency.

Practice plus joy is play.

I've been reading through Philippians lately, and loving the repetition of the words "joy" and "rejoice". I remember learning that Philippians is "the joyful book" back when I got my first study Bible in high school.

What struck me now, though, is the theme of *imitation*. Paul calls the Philippians to imitate Christ's

humility. He calls them to “[follow] my example, brothers and sisters, and just as you have us as a model, keep your eyes on those who live as we do.” He tells them again in the last chapter to “put into practice” whatever they’ve learned from him.

Again: practice plus joy is play.

Is it too much of a stretch to think that Paul is calling us to play? To make the holy work of following Jesus a game that we practice and practice and enjoy until at last our lowly bodies are transformed? That we pursue with single-minded urgency, just as children do? Begging just five more minutes to keep going because of its life-giving pleasure?

For too long, I’ve thought my spiritual life needed to be unpleasant if it was going to be worthwhile. I felt sure I needed to push past my natural reluctance to chisel away my disobedience. I had to get up early and read the Bible I wasn’t excited about, because it was spelled out in Scripture.

I had to pray X minutes, memorize Scriptures, take notes on sermons.

I looked at discipleship as sort of a never-ending boot camp.

And I had to paste a smile to my face while I did the endless faith pushups.

No, I'm saying now. No. I'm learning that I profoundly misunderstand the good God who made me. Who has called me to delight in him, enjoy him forever. Who has made little apprentices (children) for me to watch and learn from.

Children learn through games, through laughter, through excited repetition.

Become like little children, Jesus says. Let them come to me, and do not hinder them.

I am trying every day to see the spiritual disciplines Jesus calls me to as spiritual play. I am trying to believe my old attitude of grimness can be transformed into anticipation. I am

practicing routine joy, routine eagerness. I am looking hard at my beliefs about God and wondering: have I really ever believed that he was a Good Father, desiring to give me a fish? God created children, not boot camp. Why ever would I think the second was His style?

I'm trying, now, to move into the disciplines that sound like fun. I am trying to see the ones that don't sound like fun with new eyes. Because a good God who calls me to delight in Him will surely give me a natural desire to seek Him.

I am determined to make this holy work joyful in my life. To dance my way back to Jesus. To watch how my children sing Jesus' name, and make short work of imitating them.



Can you use your body or hands today to praise God? To dance, or color, or paint or sing? Do something exuberant and playful with Jesus.

Start

*We name ourselves by the
choices we make.*

Madeleine L'Engle

I want to challenge you. (Three guesses what the challenge is.)

Yeah, that's it. *Start.*

I'm betting you're looking at the page in confusion, wondering *what*. Or *how*. Or what God would have you do. You want an outline. You want to think about everything, and figure out your life, and pray a whole bunch, and discern what your passions are, and where you need to improve most, and once you do *that*, you'll start moving forward.

I want to encourage you to do something different.

Throw something on the wall,
and see if it sticks

Take a deep breath, say, “Help!”
to God, and then do a tiny little step
forward.

Don’t overthink it. *Start.*

I can already hear your
objections:

- *How will I know I’m in God’s will?*

Remember that whole “joy”
thing? Ask for God’s help as you
leap, think of joyful things, then
go. Keep it simple. Peter did not
make a business plan before he
left his nets.

- *What if I choose the wrong thing?*

There is no wrong place to start.
Really. If you change one tiny
part of your life, it will have a
ripple effect. Your creativity will
affect your faith will affect your
relationships. Don’t believe me?
Read *The Power of Habit*.

- *I'm not brave like you!*
I've had a few people call me brave this year, which I *really* appreciate, but every time I feel like laughing. Me, brave? And then I thought about it: being brave is doing things that scare you, no matter how silly your fears are. Today, *you* have the chance to be brave in a tiny way. And tomorrow. And pretty soon, you'll have a life of bravery. Period.
- *It's easy for you to say.*
Can I be honest here? This e-book is a scary experiment for me. So is the blog. Every time I ask a question at the end of a post, I tremble. Emailing other bloggers? Terrifying. Trying new faith disciplines, being honest about my doubts? Eep. If I can do it, you can. Your success will look different than mine, sure. But it will be *yours*, and sweeter for it.

- *The idea of starting makes me anxious!*

Listen to your anxiety. Honor it. Your first step could be praying that God would give you a way to start without anxiety. Without beating yourself up. Pray for the joyful spirit you long to have.

Just start. Choose life. Choose joy. Choose a small, tiny, little yes. Today.

You'll already be succeeding, whether or not the choice you make goes well or poorly.

Because the success isn't some gold star someone will pin on your chest once you get to a fictitious finish line. The faith doesn't come once you answer all your questions.

No: faith comes with moving forwards first in the darkness. Success is deciding to do something, telling yourself it's important to you, and then trying. Not even succeeding at it. Just trying.

I have gotten gold stars. I have gotten starring roles in shows. I have graduated with prizes and good grades and fancy Latin honors. I have had people tell me I was talented, and gotten into the program, and won the scholarship. I have been a Christian leader. I have stood in front of the congregation and said the call to worship.

And every time I won a gold stars, I was back to doubting myself about five minutes after the achievement. Sometimes, I'd doubt myself because of the achievement—because it felt like fraud.

You know what actually lasts? Deciding to do something just for you. Not for an award, or a prize, or for a new job or because it pays. Deciding to do something—even a small something—and then following through. Setting one goal—the easiest one you can think of—and reaching for it until somehow, you

grab hold of it. And then doing it again.

Frankly, it will feel good and last even if no one else notices. Because reaching out to things that bring you joy makes joy a habit and a constant companion. Living in a way that affirms God's goodness and calling in your life increases your faith.

I challenge you: start. Don't plan. Just dream something very small, very tiny, and do it.

If you're still stumped, let me give you a few suggestions:

- Make something. When's the last time you worked with your hands? To paint, or sculpt, or cook, or work with wood, or sew? Make a commitment to yourself to try that thing once a week—for fifteen minutes, say—for the next six weeks. Apprenticing yourself to creativity and beauty is a sure-fire way to open up your heart to joy.

- Become a beginner. Is there a skill or craft or subject area you're curious about? What's something you could do today to learn about it? I'm curious about feminism and theology, and knitting, and working with clay. I could look up Internet sites that give lessons, ask a friend for recommendations about where to start, or order a book from the library. Prepare to get uncomfortable and frustrated as you try; and to feel exhilarated when you finally make progress.
- Write it down. Write down one dream you've been picking in that dark space behind your heart. A dream of travel or service or creativity or honesty. Be specific. What would it look like to have that dream fulfilled? How would it make you feel? What, today, could you do to lean towards that dream? What could you do tomorrow? Writing things down doesn't commit you

to doing anything, but being honest with yourself about what you want is an amazingly powerful habit.

- Try a new habit. About two years ago, I decided to start journaling again after more than a decade of not doing so. It has been the foundation for a ton of positive changes in my life. Is there a daily or weekly discipline you sense could be helpful to you? Why not commit to it? I suggest reading *The Power of Habit* if you have trouble starting new routines—it is really specific about
- Be a graffiti artist: Write down an affirming quote someplace, and stick it up on your wall. Put it above your mirror. Paste it above your door. This is a big yes: encouraging yourself externally to dream dreams and see visions. Tape some copy paper together and use a sharpie. It doesn't have to be

perfect to be a kind of
breathtaking, brave art.

- Buy a tool. If there's something you love doing, invest \$5 or \$10 today in affirming that pursuit. Buy a new notebook, good paper, a special spice, an app. Affirm that pursuing joy is important enough to invest in.
- Be honest. If these ideas seem too overwhelming to you today, then write down why. The act of being honest with yourself is incredibly healing. That is a big yes, too.
- Pray. Again, pray for ideas. Pray for a spirit of adventure and imagination. Pray against discouragement and anxiety.

I just wrote to someone today that at the beginning of my practice of little yeses, I assumed that bigger yeses required more bravery than little ones. **But the opposite is true.** The first steps, however small they are, are much, much more daunting than later

ones, no matter whether they seem more impressive. So start.

Sing one song, and your life will soon start filling with music.

Help

I hope that these reflections and suggestions are helpful to you. I pray that God transforms your life, and fills it with purpose, creativity, service, joy, and beauty.

Now: could I ask for your help? I'd love to have this be a conversation: because truly, I am on the same journey as you. I'm no expert on all of this, just a beginner marveling at how God has already done a lot of work in a short time. I'm hoping these words encouraged you; could I ask your encouragement in return?

Here are two ways you could help:

- Send me an email at heather.caliri@gmail.com to tell me about one step you're taking to start today. Small and unimpressive is *even better* than lofty. Let's get really miniscule in

our thinking. I'd love to pray for you, and connect.

- Share this e-book. I would love you to send on this resource to friends or family that you think might find it useful. Or, you could recommend it on Facebook or Twitter. Spreading the word about it encourages me tremendously.

That's it! Thank you for considering these steps, and make sure to keep in touch. I hope we can encourage each other as we move forward—in tiny steps—on this journey.

About

Heather Caliri is a writer based out of San Diego. She started saying little yeses in faith, creativity, and parenting—and was shocked by the results. You can join the adventure on [her blog](#), or by subscribing [here](#).