

Faith, Friends and Other Flotation Devices

a woman's guide to abundant living

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PUBLICATIONS

Contents

<i>Introduction</i>	5
<i>Faith</i>	7
<i>Friends</i>	13
<i>Balance</i>	19
<i>Forgiveness</i>	25
<i>Focus</i>	31
<i>Providence</i>	37
<i>Freedom</i>	43
<i>Fundamentals</i>	49
<i>Fragrance</i>	55
<i>Regret</i>	61
<i>Contentment</i>	67
<i>Respect</i>	73
<i>Fidelity</i>	79
<i>Waiting</i>	85
<i>Fearlessness</i>	91
<i>Right</i>	97
<i>Faithfulness</i>	103
<i>Mercy</i>	109
<i>Fulfillment</i>	115
<i>Peace</i>	121
<i>Sources</i>	127

Introduction

God has blessed us with a three-strand, no-fail plan for navigating life's challenges. Can you guess the strands of this fundamental trio? It's fabulously simple.

- **Faith** — that personal, intimate relationship with Jesus that give us the hope of making an eternal difference by focusing completely on the faithfulness of God in ever-changing circumstances.
- **Friends** — those fun-loving, fiercely loyal women whose relationships stand the test of time and trial.
- **Flotation Devices** — the skills, experiences and wisdom of a fragrant, fruitful life nurtured by God.

Look around, and you'll see I'm right. Each and every day we women rely on our faith, our friends and a multitude of what I call flotation devices. God gives us a plentiful supply of resources to help us thrive: robust scriptural promises, intimate caring relationships, a generous supply of buoyant faith-filled, life-saving instruction. As we flourish, so do all those who come into contact with us.

“What is it that keeps me afloat?” The first purpose of this book is to help you answer this question. In other words, what holds you steady, keeps you on course, and helps you remain focused when all of life's stresses and demands threaten to pull you under? In each chapter, I offer an example of a woman who has faced down hardship, hurt and disappointment by banking on the truth found in God's word. I hope you will be encouraged by these examples to help you understand and

cope with the demands in your own life. What better way to discover and appreciate God's intended purposes before, during and after each season of stretching and molding?

I also offer twenty "flotation devices" — faith-inspiring exercises at the end of each chapter — to help you apply God's life-giving truth in everyday situations. I hope you will see how faith, when embraced, is powerful indeed; how the right friends can serve as stalwart counselors to influence, guide and accompany you; and how surrendering your will through God's grace is truly the most freeing, peaceful and fruitful way to live.

In this book I use *The Message: Catholic / Ecumenical Edition* by Presbyterian minister and biblical scholar Rev. Eugene Peterson to help us uncover fresh meaning in the familiar verses of the Bible, that is, to hear God's word in a new and faith-affirming way.

Michele Howe
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Faith

It's what we trust in but don't yet see that keeps us going.

2 CORINTHIANS 5:7

Everywhere we look — billboards, magazines, newspapers, books, movies or television programs — we are bombarded with the message that what we *see* is what we get. Tempting as it can be to fall prey to this dangerous pressure — and it *is* tempting, God's word tells us to believe the very opposite. Clearly stated, the Bible commands us to “live by faith, not by sight.” Can't get any clearer than that, can we? This directive makes marvelous sense — the faith-type-of-sense, that is — for the Bible tells us that we will have trouble in this world, but that Christ has overcome it — *all* of it.

Circumstances frequently weigh us down, burden us with their complexity, and confound us as we try to make sense of our lives. Sadly, we spend far too much time and effort trying to figure out “why?” and “how can I?” instead of leaning on the solid truths of Scripture. God's word can give us the strength to get past the daily distractions and to find healing for today's heartaches. After all, we are called to live by faith. Let's step past the need to see with our eyes and start focusing our attention on matters of the heart of faith.

Tuned In

Oblivious to the escalating demands placed upon her, Renee sat typing away on her computer, working against a looming deadline and rising blood pressure to complete her latest and, thankfully, final research paper.

Feeling the muscles in her upper back spasm again, Renee wondered for umpteenth time just how prudent a choice she'd made when she decided to finish her undergraduate degree in elementary education. It seemed as soon as she had enrolled, her life had gone into overdrive. And it had. Even though her two children were now college-age young adults, Renee and her husband Rick held active positions in several community volunteer organizations. Both were also caring for an elderly parent. Still, Renee was eager to complete her education and allow her long-held-at-bay dream of becoming a teacher take flight.

But neither Renee nor Rick had counted on his dad falling and breaking a hip and, at the same time, Renee's dad developing double pneumonia. She found herself running between the hospital and the nursing facility morning and afternoon. Trying to manage her home and doing double-duty at her father's house and her in-law's place was driving Renee to distraction.

Unable to concentrate, Renee pushed herself away from the desk and took a deep breath. And another.

"Relax," she chided herself. "You've faced worse before."

Glancing around the office, Renee spied the large conch shell she'd retrieved from last year's beach vacation. She picked it up, examined the rough, bleached exterior, and then held it to her ear. She could hear the faint sound of the ocean within.

Breathing more slowly now, Renee closed her eyes and remembered how she had relaxed on the beach every day, eyes shut to the rest of the world, and simply listened to the rush of waves. She'd felt so at peace and so secure knowing that the God who created such majesty was always watching over her, guarding her.

Yes, life right now was hard, and Renee's heart hurt to bursting, but she also realized she had to take responsibility for her own responses to the outside stresses. No one but she could take charge of her attitude and the direction she allowed her thoughts and emotions to travel.

Opening her eyes, Renee thanked God for the power such a memory held as it healed and sustained her even now.



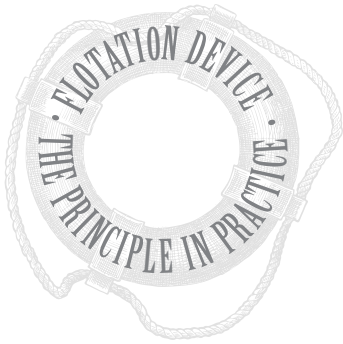
*When I was upset and beside myself,
you calmed me down and cheered me up.*

PSALM 94:19

Truth, especially biblical truth, is like sand or oil. Like sand it grinds at us, smoothing the rough places, causing friction in our moving parts to get our attention and to halt certain directions. Like oil, truth can smooth the rough ways of life, soothe the hurts, and even heal the brokenhearted.

JERRY WHITE

MAKING PEACE WITH REALITY



Faith

*when heartache
happens*

*Nothing strengthens the judgment
and quickens the conscience like individual responsibility.*

ELIZABETH CADY STANTON

I hurt. You hurt. We all hurt. It's a given. At one time or another, we all feel the anguish of emotional pain. We are often emotionally driven, at the mercy of our ever-changing feelings, and far too dependent upon circumstances around us.

Clearly, some individuals express emotion more than others. But still, it is safe to say that all of us — every man, woman and child — experience the full gamut of emotional responses and will continue to do so our entire lives. It is our *reaction* to these powerful feelings that counts. Are we more reactive or proactive? Do we take some measure of responsibility for how we feel or not?

Most times, we respond to life's stresses — the ups and downs of daily living and any accompanying negative feelings — with an unconscious acceptance of both the good and bad. We realize that every day isn't going to be a warm-fuzzy-feeling one. On those especially won-

drous occasions when every aspect of our emotional being affirms that life is good, we bask in a warm glow of satisfaction. Fleeting as those rare moments may be, we can mistakenly use them as the gauge and end goal for every other feeling we experience. If it makes us feel good, it must be good. If something makes us feel bad, it must be bad.

Not so, say Elyse Fitzpatrick and Laura Hendrickson, M.D., authors of *Will Medicine Stop the Pain?* Feeling bad can be a blessing in that it alerts us that something is wrong. We need to heed that warning and take action. Warnings, after all, are necessary and good.

Likewise, we can mistakenly believe that we are helpless victims of our volatile emotional state. Buying into this fatalistic mentality is never conducive to good health. Might it be more productive and more helpful if we start fighting against the blue moods with deliberate, vigorous attitude adjustments and lifestyle choices? We *can* learn to think differently. We *can* develop methods to approach our circumstances and our responses with grit and faith-fueled determination. By doing so, we can begin rewiring our automatic negative reactions and replace them with a change-is-possible outlook.

Fitzpatrick and Hendrickson also offer some reliable, practical thoughts on dealing with run-away emotions. For example, when feeling overwhelmed by feelings of discouragement, depression, or a simple case of downheartedness, we should become students of our own habits and circumstances: lifestyle choices, medication, fluctuating hormones, and attitudes toward life in general. We should learn what triggers affect our moods, and train ourselves to anticipate those events, situations or people that historically bring emotional upset. Then we should take responsibility for making internal or external changes. Perception matters. Choices matter. So instead of giving in to the blues, we should counter them with constructive, decisive thinking and action. It's surprising how these bleak emotions can slowly be replaced by a positive outlook. Do it for you, do it for others.

**FAITH-FUELED EXERCISES
FOR YOUR EMOTIONS**

- Be your own detective. Recognize the areas where you tend to struggle most and be ready to prevent emotional derailments.
- Fight emotional angst by giving thanks. Give thanks for at least ten things every morning.
- Meditate on the truth. Locate and memorize Bible passages that speak of God's promises to provide and care for us.
- Take the offensive. Talk back to yourself when you start to feel overwhelmed or defeated.
- Pray daily for the mind of Christ. Ask God for wisdom and insight on every matter.