

PERMISSION TO THRIVE

There is no doubt that much of the past year has challenged us in ways we never expected. It has been a year of uncertainty, loss, and change. Most of us have had to make hard choices and sacrifices or experienced loss that we felt powerless to control. I wrote the following meditations, prayers, and practices from a place of personal experience, observation, and consideration. I'm a middle-aged mom, wife, daughter, coworker, friend, and neighbor who has been doing the best she can to navigate this new world experience. As I wrote this, I thought about you often, and I've made some assumptions about the experiences we have probably shared, even though we don't know each other. I've assumed there's a good chance you cancelled some celebrations and maybe you have worried about your job, having enough money, or even food. I assume that, like me, you've been anxious about a loved one's health and wondered when you can hug your friends with abandon again. It's been tough, hasn't it?

Despite all of this, I believe we have a choice about how we respond and navigate these changes and that each of us has the ability to cultivate calm, creativity, clarity, and grace in our-



selves. In fact, I believe we can even give ourselves *permission to thrive*.

I think the smartest and bravest thing we can do during this time or any other time of great stress and uncertainty is to pay attention and learn the lessons of the experience. I also believe that we have grace and God with us to strengthen, console, guide, and love us through it all. God wants us to thrive even during this time because God wants *us* to be the strength, counselor, guide, and loving companion for others. God wants this for us because God wants us to create a world that is loving, peaceful, and abundant for all, even during hard times. These words were crafted from personal experience, prayer, long walks, and courage. As I wrote this, I did my best to hold you, dear reader, in my heart. My hope for you is that these words bring you comfort and clarity and that they draw you closer to God, to your family, and to yourself. Peace to you, joy to you, and may these words help you thrive in surprising and *wonder-full* ways.

From your neighbor who is holding you in her heart,

CONNIE



Don't Stop the Feeling

PONDER

Have you felt more emotional lately? Are you finding that little things seem to spark emotions in you and in ways that haven't happened in the past? When you are on high alert all the time, living in uncertainty and anxiety, it's pretty normal for your nervous system to have a short fuse. That's why it's so important to do everything you can to pay attention to what is happening in you and build emotional awareness. The better we are at recognizing what we are feeling and why we are feeling it, the better our responses will be to ourselves and each other. When we recognize that what we are feeling is frustration and sadness because we had to cancel another family gathering, or embarrassment or even shame for having to wear a mask to the grocery store, we have a roadmap for responding. When we ignore, hide, or deny our emotions, they won't go away. Rather, they continue to build up until they erupt, and often those eruptions are not moments we are proud to remember. Emotions are real, they can be felt in your body, and they shouldn't be ignored. But you are also not captive to your emotions, and you have a choice about what you do with them.

PRAYER

Dear God, some days I'm just exhausted and I think this is all too much. I run through the range of emotions and everyone seems to take a little piece from me until I feel like a crumbled wall. On those days, I humbly ask you to help me build up again in ways that are stronger and more resilient. Help me to look for the loving care and opportunities around me that will help me rebuild, so I can, in turn, help others do the same.

PRACTICE

Humans have a wide and colorful range of emotions. How many emotions can you name? Surprisingly, many people are only able to name just a few. When we are able to name them, we are better able to navigate them. Make a list of all the emotions you can think of, and keep coming back to that list when you remember another one. Then, take time to either think about or write down a time when you felt each emotion. When do you remember feeling excited or frustrated? You can do the same practice with a loved one. When do you remember your son or daughter disappointed or your partner scared? Practicing this awareness in ourselves and seeing it in others will help us better navigate through the ups and downs and even keep us healthier.

Give Yourself Some Grace

PONDER

These days of uncertainty can take a lot out of a person. We are constantly on alert and navigating a new normal of masks, distancing, and change. There are days when you are going to feel exhausted, lose your train of thought, or simply feel like crawling into a ball. The last thing you should do is to get down on yourself for feeling this way. These feelings are your guideposts for navigating through, and these guides are telling you that it's time to care for yourself, to give yourself some grace.

PRAYER

Dear Grace-filled God, some days I think the world around me is crumbling and that the only one to blame is me. Help me to look up, look around, and give myself a break.

PRACTICE

Many days, “good enough” *is* good enough. Suppers get burnt; appointments get forgotten; mistakes are made. As the saying goes, “Don’t let perfection get in the way of good.” That’s what grace gives us, and *we* have the ability to give ourselves that gift. Today, practice talking to yourself in the same way you talk to your best friend. When your friend laments that they are overwhelmed, worried, or disappointed, you probably jump in and give them the encouragement they need. Your best friend probably does the same for you. So today is the day to start practicing being your own best friend.

Balance

PONDER

Some days it rains. Some days the sun shines bright. The world needs both to thrive and grow, and so do we. There are days it feels as though nothing is going right, but other days you are definitely the hero. And, believe it or not, we need both of those days too. The down days give us *opportunity*. Yes, really, *opportunity*. Those are the days we learn balance and resilience. Those are the days we understand our strengths and our fallibilities. We learn we are human and that we have it within ourselves to thrive. Our task is to pay attention to the rain and sun, to live fully in each day, and to recognize their gifts.

PRAYER

Dear God of sun and rain, help me to remember that storms are temporary and that even in the midst of the lightning and thunder, the sun will eventually come out again, perhaps even bringing a rainbow. Help me to cherish the days of sun, so that when the storms come again (as they always do), I can draw on my strength and reserves of hope to navigate through.

PRACTICE

When you find yourself in a “rainy” day, take heart and remind yourself of how temporary the moment will be. Draw on your memories of both the sunshine and the rain to remind yourself of how life is made of ups and downs.

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Don't Forget to Breathe

PONDER

Taking a deep breath in and a longer breath out is a simple but effective way to disrupt the stress of the moment. The hardest part is remembering to pay attention to your breath when your mind is racing. Taking a breath and feeling the inhale fill your chest takes you out of your mind and thoughts and into your body. Breathing seems like a simple solution, perhaps oversimplified? But how many times have you caught yourself holding your breath? Or struggling to catch your breath when you are filled with anxiety or fear? It's actually surprising how often we forget to breathe.

PRAYER

Dear God, you created life-giving breath. All creatures, big and small, plant or animal, need to inhale and exhale. Help me build a habit of noticing my breath, of feeling it filling my chest and then leaving my body. Help me to notice and feel the peace that the breath brings, especially in those moments that take my breath away.

PRACTICE

The great thing about noticing your breath is that you can do this work anywhere at any time. You can do it when you are praying; you can do it before a big presentation or after putting the kids to bed. Don't be afraid to give yourself reminders to breathe. It seems silly, but it can be surprising how often we are holding tension and our breath inside of ourselves. A simple, gentle reminder can be very effective. Here are some ideas: write "BREATHE" on a sticky note and put it somewhere you will see it every day; schedule a five-minute daily breathing break in your work calendar; wear a piece of jewelry that, whenever you glance at it, reminds you to inhale...and then exhale....

Joy Is Contagious

PONDER

Over the last few months, we've become very aware of how viruses spread. We have been given advice and recommendations on how to protect ourselves, our loved ones, and our community. We are washing our hands, wearing masks, and distancing ourselves. In all of our vigilance, though, let's not forget how to spread joy, especially when it's so easy to do, because it really is contagious. Think about how easy it is to giggle with your grandchild, dance a little (or a lot) to your favorite song, or cheer out loud for your best friend when she tells you her good news.

PRAYER

Dear Joyful One, help me to be an instrument of joy! I know that it actually takes courage to be joyful in our troubled world, but I also know that without joy, it's really hard to be courageous. Please fill me with the courage I need to spread joy in all the corners of my world.

PRACTICE

Some people believe that joy is only for the very young, that once we grow up that we need to grow out of being joyful. Don't believe that for a minute. What is life without a moment of spontaneous laughter that makes your side ache? Like all good things, though, fostering joy may not make it on your top-priority to-do list. It might get shuffled in between or after other activities. In fact, you may have shuffled joy around so much, you may not remember what makes you joyful. The good news is that joy is always waiting for us and doesn't require fanfare or a fat pocketbook. Great joy often comes in the quietest, simplest times. When is the last time you felt joy? Soak in that memory and then find time to share it with someone. Make it contagious.