This Can Make Reaching Your Health Goals Much Easier

This week, CrossFit 925 (the gym my husband I own in San Antonio, Texas) wrapped up a women's-only, "Tough Tigress Team Challenge." (Awesome name, right?) Over the last six weeks, two teams took a health and fitness journey to sharpen their nutrition as well as achieve two individual goals inside the gym, from doing "boy push-ups" and unassisted pull-ups to running a quarter mile nonstop.

Each team completed two workouts the first week, and then repeated those same workouts again last week as we neared the end of the challenge. Whichever team improved the most (through Team Captain-led "homework" and a team-decided nutrition game plan) over the course of the Challenge will win! (The scores are being tallied up as we speak!)

I was blown away by the level of interest this challenge generated when the other team captain and I introduced the idea over two months ago. Our sign-up board immediately filled up with names, and the ladies couldn't stop chatting about what their goals should be. Facebook groups were immediately formed for the purpose of posting inspiring quotes, healthy recipes, motivational photos and progress statuses.

I've received texts about whether Chick-fil-A bread is processed (answer: yes) and how awesome spelt bread has proven to be. This challenge was a team effort, and that we are stronger and more powerful together than we ever could be apart.

I bring this all up to you because what this "Tigress" experience taught me is just how important community really is. There's a reason why God established the institution of families in the Garden of Eden.

There’s a reason why, in the book of Acts, the early followers of Christ were gathering together so often. There’s a reason why when two or more are gathered in the name of Jesus that He is with them. What’s the reason? It’s because we were created to make fellowship a daily practice, first with God, and then with our fellow man.

If you were to ask each participating “Tigress” if she wanted to hone her nutrition or chase specific goals prior to the Challenge, I can guarantee at least 99.9 percent of them would answer with a resounding “Yes!”

So why didn’t they start on their goals months ago? Why do any of us procrastinate and push our heart’s desires to the back burner? I think the answer, most of the time, is that goals are much harder to commit to and stick to when pursued alone. But the moment a friend or family member comes alongside us and proposes taking on a challenge *together*, be it purging a closet, painting a room, losing a dress size, or working out five days a week, we suddenly find the oomph we need to shake our dreams from their slumber and lift them up into the light of day.

Whatever the Lord has instilled in you to accomplish, He doesn’t intend for you to labor for it alone. On the contrary, He has provided each of us with an incredible support system to encourage us and cheer us on to victory, *starting with Him.*

Today, I encourage you to reach out to your Maker, the ultimate Creator and Conqueror of passions and dreams, and ask Him to bring into your life just the right people to help you with a challenge you know it’s time to take on. Then, before your eyes close upon your pillow tonight, thank Him for the answers He’s sending your way, from the glorious throne of heaven to your humble path on earth. When morning comes, make up your mind to live expectantly, live joyfully and fearlessly, for your Father has plans only to prosper you as you trust and grow in Him.

In my latest book, *Immeasurable: Diving into the Depths of God's Love*, I share my own journey of faith as God took me by the hand and gently led me through valleys of hardship and darkness, doubt and despair. I testify firsthand about His unwavering goodness and faithfulness in showing me how very much He cares for our God-given dreams and aspirations.

The Lord has no favorites. He desires each and every one of us His children to have life "in abundance." Today, I am praying that you will receive a fresh revelation of God's love for you, and that this little letter will somehow speak to your heart and soul and refresh your desire to chase your goals with relentless fervor and faith in your King.

Stay fit, stay faithful.

Diana Anderson-Tyler *is the author of Creation House's* Fit for Faith: A Christian Woman's Guide to Total Fitness, Perfect Fit: Weekly Wisdom and Workouts for Women of Faith and Fitness, *and her latest book,* Immeasurable: Diving Into the Depths of God's Love. *Her popular website can be found at* dianafit.com, *and she is the owner and a coach at CrossFit 925. Diana can be reached on Twitter.*

For the original article, visit *dianaandersontyler.com*.

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7 Things Church Members Should Say to Guests in a Worship Service

One of the more common questions I'm asked relates to growth barriers. For example, church leaders may want to know how to

move past the 150-attendance level of the past five years. Or other leaders desire to know how to break though financial giving barriers.

Those questions are tough because they often presume a brief response to be adequate. In reality, there are many theological and methodological issues at work in growth barriers. Today, I am looking at a very basic barrier: lack of friendliness to church guests.

In a previous blog post, I noted things we should *not* say to a guest in our worship services. In today's post I look at the positive perspective: seven things we *should* say to guests.

1. "Thank you for being here." It's just that basic. I have heard from numerous church guests who returned because they were simply told "thank you."

2. "Let me help you with that." If you see someone struggling with umbrellas, young children, diaper bags, purses and other items, a gesture to hold something for them is a huge positive. Of course, this comment is appropriate for member to member as well.

3. "Please take my seat." I actually heard that comment twice in a church where I was speaking in the Nashville area. The first comment came from a member to a young family of five who were trying to find a place to sit together.

4. "Here is my email address. Please let me know if I can help in any way." Of course, this comment must be used with discretion, but it can be a hugely positive message to a guest.

5. "Can I show you where you need to go?" Even in smaller churches, guests will not know where to find the nursery, restrooms and small group meeting areas. You can usually tell when a guest does not know where he or she is to go.

6. “Let me introduce you to _____.” The return rate of guests is always higher if they meet other people. A church member may have the opportunity to introduce the guest to the pastor, other church staff and other members of the church.

7. “Would you join us for lunch?” I saved this question for last for two reasons. First, the situation must obviously be appropriate before you offer the invitation. Second, I have seen this approach have the highest guest return rate of any one factor. What if your church members sought to invite different guests 6 to 12 times a year? The burden would not be great; but the impact would be huge.

Let’s look at one example of breaking attendance barriers by saying the right things to guests. Presume your church has two first-time guests a week. Over the course of a year, the church would have 100 first-time guests. With most of the members being genuinely guest friendly, you could see half of those guests become active members. Attendance could thus increase by as much as 50 persons every year.

Good interaction with guests is a huge step toward breaking attendance barriers, but it is obviously not the only step. We are launching a new subscription ministry called Church Answers. One of the three resources you will get every month is called “Breaking Barriers.”

We are so excited about the response so far. **You can register here**. But registration closes in a few days, so hurry.

Thom S. Rainer *is the president of LifeWay Christian Resources. For the original article, visit* thomrainer.com.

With Summer Coming, Be Leery of Sunscreen Claims

Many sunscreens do not offer the protection we think they do, or even what they claim to offer. Therefore, while we should definitely continue to use sunscreens, we need to avoid developing a false sense of security about their ability to protect us and our loved ones.

Such a miscalculation can lead to sunburns, which can cause deadly skin cancer … not to mention a world of hurt.

There are two types of rays: UVA and UVB. Until recently, health experts thought only the UVB rays were dangerous. For that reason, the SPF number on a sunscreen only refers to how well it protects against UVB rays.

Now we know that the UVA rays are also dangerous. That means the first thing you must do when choosing a sunscreen is make sure it protects against both UVA and UVB rays, by choosing one that offers “broad spectrum” protection.

Secondly, choose one with an SPF of at least 30. But be careful not to be fooled by an extremely high SPF numbers, such as 50.

Consumer Reports tested 34 sunscreens and found that one-third of them failed to meet their SPF and water-resistant claims … some were way off, up to 70 percent wrong.

Most of those failing products had an SPF of below 30. Then there were errors on the other side. Coppertone ClearlySheer for Beach and Pool SPF 50+ tested as an SPF 37 and Banana Boat Sport Performance with Powerstay Technology SPF 100 tested as an SPF 36.

Another problem Consumer Reports uncovered was that the

sunscreens didn’t hold up very well in water. The lesson learned from that is that we should indeed purchase waterproof sunscreens, but make sure to re-apply them after getting out of the water.

Towel-dry first so that you apply the sunscreen to dry skin. Even if you’re not in the water, make sure to re-apply sunscreen at least every two hours, but more frequently if you do get wet, which includes sweat.

As any parent knows, applying sunscreen every time their child comes out of the water is nearly impossible. That’s why it’s best not to rely too heavily on sunscreens to protect your youngsters. We must take other precautions.

This goes not only for kids, but for all of us. In fact, research show that people who rely on sunscreen alone tend to burn more than those who stay in the shade and wear long sleeves.

Try to avoid the sun or stay in the shade when the sun is the strongest, which is from 10 a.m. until 4 p.m. Wear a hat and clothing made from tightly woven fabric. Dark colors are better at blocking UV rays. Hold clothing up to the light. If you can see through it, the rays can get through it, too.

In order to avoid the common mistakes people tend to make when it comes to applying sunscreens, keep these tips in mind:

- Apply sunscreen 15-30 minutes before you go outside.
- Make sure you use at least one teaspoon of sunscreen on each body part. The face, head and neck counts as one body part, as does one arm. Also one leg. The chest and abdomen count as one body part. The back plus the back of the neck is another.
- Watch out for spray-on sunscreens due to the risk of inhaling toxic ingredients. In fact, Consumer Reports recommends avoiding the use of spray sunscreens on children, who are at the greatest risk of complications

from inhaling them. If you absolutely must use a spray sunscreen on a child, at least spray it into your hand first and then rub it on your little one. Sprays tend to miss their mark when it's windy. Don't spray directly on your face. And since spray sunscreens are flammable, don't go near an open flame until it dries on the skin.

So when it comes to outdoor activities, make sure to wear sunscreen … shoot for one that offers "broad spectrum" protection with an SPF of 30 to 50. Choose a lotion and use lots of it, reapplying early and often.

But whatever you do, don't rely on that sunscreen as your only protection against the harmful rays of the sun. Try to avoid the harshest midday rays. And while outside, wear protective clothing and seek shade whenever possible.

For the original article, visit cbn.com.

Beating Dementia: 'Two Weeks to a Younger Brain'

The baby boomers will live longer than any generation in history, thanks to broad advances in modern medicine. Yet for millions of Americans, longer life will come with a cost—the greater likelihood of developing Alzheimer's disease.

The leading cause of dementia has already reached crisis proportions in this country, striking 5 million Americans. It is the sixth-leading cause of death and the number of cases is expected to triple in coming decades.

But what if you could take a few simple steps to stay sharp as you grow older and even reverse the natural aging process that

can take a toll on the brain? That, in essence, is the promise of a revolutionary new method developed by Gary Small, M.D., a professor of psychiatry at the University of California-Los Angeles and director of UCLALongevityCenter

In his new book, *2 Weeks to a Younger Brain*, Dr. Small details how to improve your memory, learn and retain new information, and maintain the mental acuity of your prime years—no matter how old you are.

In an interview with Rick Unger on Newsmax TV's *Steve Malzberg Show*, Dr. Small explains how he and his wife/co-author Gigi Vorgan have translated the latest brain science into practical strategies and exercises that yield quick and long-lasting benefits.

He says his plan can not only improve memory, but also strengthens one's physical health by reducing the risk for diabetes, heart disease and stroke.

"There's a lot of new science on the brain. It turns out a lot of people don't realize how much control they have over their brain health and their memory," says Dr. Small, author of **The Mind Health Report** newsletter.

"The first question people ask is: Can you really get my brain younger in two weeks? And my short answer is 'yes.' Honestly, we got the scientific evidence to show that. We've done studies looking at pencil and paper test on memory, but also (peering) into the brain with brain scans. We find after simple exercise after a couple of weeks we can literally rewire your brain and get it healthier, smarter and stronger."

Dr. Small notes word puzzles, games that stretch the mind, memory-building exercises, and other brain-training techniques the book details can help work the brain in ways that mirror physical exercise—which is, itself, beneficial to mental health.

“If you use certain computer games, if you learn the memory techniques we teach in the book, you can actually get your brain wires to function better,” he says. “We can use the games and the puzzles to exercise our brains, build brain muscle, but there’s more than that. We need to get physical. Physical exercise is one of the best things you can for your brain.”

Dr. Small explains that exercises pushes the heart to pump oxygen and nutrients to your brain cells, which actually makes it get bigger and function better.

“In fact, your body produces chemicals [during exercise] that improve your mood as well as other chemicals that get your brain cells to communication more effectively.”

Dr. Small recommends getting at least 15 minutes of moderate-intensity exercises—such as brisk walking—every day. He also advises strength training several times a week, citing studies that show both boost brain size and function.

“A bigger brain is a better brain,” he says. “No matter what age, it’s remarkable.”

Dr. Small also notes diet is a key factor in brain health, as well as maintaining a healthy weight.

“One of the biggest problems we face today is an epidemic of overweight and obesity. It turns out that if you’re overweight, it doubles your risk of Alzheimer’s. If you’re obese, it quadruples your risk and that’s the bad news,” he notes.

“The good news is we find that if we put people who are obese on a strict diet and they lose weight, their memory improves in a few months. Your brain is very resilient if you take care of it. Also, you’ve got to think about the kinds of foods you eat.”

Dr. Small explains that nutrients such as omega-3 fatty acids in fish, nuts, fruits, vegetables and other healthy foods protect the brain and keep it in tip-top shape. On the other hand, processed and sugary foods can have the opposite effect.

The program he has developed in *2 Weeks to a Younger Brain* has been effective for many of his patients, he says.

“What we do is lay out the program very simply and we show people the exercises to do,” he says. “We also convince them of the connection between their behavior and their brain health. If you understand that, you’re more likely to follow through.”

For the original article, visit newsmaxhealth.com*.*

Here’s a Game Plan For How to Quit Porn

Several months ago, a video went viral regarding pornography from an unlikely source. Comedian Russell Brand discussed his battle with porn, the negative effect it has had in his life, and his desire to have it out of his life.

First, he shares his belief that: “Our attitudes toward sex have become warped and perverted and have deviated from its true function as an expression of love and a means for procreating.” He goes on to personally confess, “[Porn] is something I haven’t been able to make a long-term commitment to not looking at, it’s affected my ability to relate to women.”

A study by one of the top neuroscientists, Valerie Voon from

Cambridge University, may explain the reason. The June 2014 study revealed that compulsive porn watchers experience the same reactions in the brain as addicted drug users. Can the effects of porn on the brain be reversed? Is there hope in quitting? The answer to both of those questions is *Yes.*

Here is a game plan for how to quit porn.

Face the Truth

You need to admit your porn watching to someone. If you are married, I highly recommend telling your spouse if they don't know, even if it causes hurt feelings. Secrets keep us enslaved. When secrets are brought into the light of day, the ugliness is exposed. Face it and own it. This is the first step towards being free.

Breaking the Cycle

When porn is viewed, neurotransmitters called dopamine flood the brain (similar to heroin use). When the doses are too high, as is the case with habitual porn viewing, the brain adjusts to restore balance by reducing the amount of dopamine available.

This causes a decreasing amount of pleasure experienced. So, we need to consume larger amounts of porn and potentially more graphic images to receive the pleasure we had before.

Lower dopamine levels can make us feel depressed, causing us to go back to porn to stimulate more. It is a cycle. The good news is that when we quit watching porn, the brain readjusts and corrects its dopamine levels. It's simply a matter of breaking the cycle by not feeding the appetite. In time, the appetite will decline by not feeding it. The most difficult days are in the beginning. It will gradually get better.

There are support centers that do week-long intensives that are great at beginning the process.

Group Support and Encouragement

You can’t do this alone. The great news is that you’re not alone. Find a group of like-minded people that you can meet with regularly and be completely honest. Make sure it is a group that is high on accountability and encouragement. Find people that will be real with you and pray with you about it.

Perform a search of porn addiction support groups or seek out churches with programs in your area. Another alternative or preferably done in conjunction with a support group is one-on-one counseling. They can give specific coping techniques when the urges come calling, act as another level of accountability, and uncover unseen triggers.

The Choice for More

The key to a full life is found in relationships. Porn alienates us from one another and causes relational difficulty. It trains our brains to live in a fantasy world, rather than connect with real human beings. Selfishness is nurtured because porn is instant gratification at the expense of people getting dehumanized. That leads to guilt, loneliness, and isolation. It is a short-term exhilaration with a long-term lower quality of life.

Intimacy takes effort, patience, and investment, but the reward is abundance. Relational intimacy refines selflessness and our ability to love. Quitting porn is a choice for more. Commit to that choice every morning, every hour, and every evening.

Have you ever tried to quit watching porn and couldn’t?

BJ Foster is the content manager for All Pro Dad and a married father of two. For the original article, visit allprodad.com.

Study Reveals Hidden Nighttime Heart Danger

Nearly half of the patients who undergo angioplasty, which often includes implantation of a stent, develop sleep apnea, a dangerous condition linked to heart attack and sudden death, a new study shows.

“Sleep apnea is a very dangerous condition and this study shows how widespread a problem it is among heart patients,” Chauncey Crandall, M.D., tells *Newsmax Health*.

About one million Americans undergo angioplasty/stenting procedures each year to widen coronary arteries narrowed by heart disease. The new research found that 45 percent of these patients suffer from obstructive sleep apnea, and 22 percent had severe apnea.

Sleep apnea is a chronic condition in which the sleeper momentarily stops breathing. This can occur hundreds of times a night, and disrupts restful sleep, leading to poor sleep and excessive daytime sleepiness. The condition is often characterized by loud snoring.

Untreated sleep apnea can lead to high blood pressure, coronary heart disease, heart attack, stroke, diabetes, and obesity.

“Sleep apnea is at epidemic proportions,” said Dr. Crandall, author of the ***Heart Health Report***. “This study shows that all heart patients should be screened for sleep apnea.”

The study involved 1,305 patients who underwent successful angioplasty procedures for heart attack or chest pain. They

underwent overnight sleep studies to check for sleep apnea.

“Our findings, in a large, multicenter sample of patients, reinforce the known association between OSA [obstructive sleep apnea] and cardiovascular disease,” said study author Luciano Drager, M.D., of the University of São Paulo School of Medicine.

The research was presented at the 2015 American Thoracic Society International Conference in Denver.

The study found that sleep apnea was more common in heart disease patients than previously thought, said Dr. Drager.

“Sleep apnea is becoming more prominent because more people are obese and they develop it because their airways are obstructed,” said Dr. Crandall.

“People with sleep apnea also commonly have high cholesterol, high triglycerides, and they are inactive. So by the time they develop sleep apnea, they are also on the road to developing heart disease.”

Screening for sleep apnea usually requires an overnight stay at a sleep center. The standard treatment is a CPAP (continuous positive airway pressure) mask worn while sleeping that keeps airways open.

For the original article, visit newsmaxhealth.com.

To Circumcise or Not to

Circumcise: What’s a Parent to Do?

Whether or not to circumcise is a question fraught with emotional, religious, psychological, medical and moral implications. All sides have argued both for and against circumcision with a high degree of emotion, leaving some parents at a loss about how to make the right choice for their child.

To help parents make a rational decision regarding neonatal circumcision, it can help to set aside these implications and examine the medical evidence for circumcision’s effects on health and safety, disease prevention and penile sensitivity.

From a urologist’s perspective, it is *better* (on balance) for a newborn male to be circumcised than not to be. Here are the reasons why:

Health and Safety

Let’s talk first about safety. Circumcision is the most common “surgical” procedure performed in the United States. More than 20 percent of the world’s male population is circumcised. Complications are rare.

In its most simplistic form, it is all about hygiene. If an uncircumcised man does not regularly retract the foreskin and wash underneath it, the natural secretions from the skin can produce a smelly, cheesy substance known as smegma. Lack of cleanliness can lead to irritation, pain and even infection. Many women complain about the odor that results from a man’s failure to wash frequently and thoroughly under the foreskin.

With regards to genital health, the importance of hygiene, particularly in uncircumcised males, cannot be emphasized enough. If an uncircumcised male has a foreskin that is easily

retracted and meticulously cleaned, the likelihood of problems is reduced. Interestingly, in the Scandinavian countries, where very few men are circumcised but meticulous penile hygiene is taught, practiced and promoted, the incidence of penile cancer and other such problems is extremely low. It is all about genital hygiene, a retractable foreskin and meticulous attention to genital cleanliness.

HIV and Cancer Prevention

Uncircumcised men have a vastly greater chance of getting penile cancer. In fact, penile cancer, which is rare in any case, is virtually unheard of among circumcised men. Recent studies of AIDS prevention in Africa suggest that male circumcision can reduce the chance of HIV in men and perhaps in women. The validity of this theory is still being tested. Research shows that cells on the underside of the foreskin are prime targets for the virus; tears and abrasions in the foreskin serve as easy points of entry for the retrovirus. Studies have estimated that circumcised men have a greater than 40 percent *lower* risk for HIV infection.

Penile Sensitivity

The concept of penile sensitivity is always added to the mix in the debate for or against circumcision. There are no scientifically controlled experiments regarding the sexual performance of circumcised versus uncircumcised men. Based on my clinical experience, there is no difference.

Some people assume that a circumcised man has greater sensitivity because he has no foreskin covering the glans. Others believe that an uncircumcised man has greater sensitivity because he has a foreskin. Neither theory is true. The fact is that the foreskin retracts when an uncircumcised man has an erection. So in the aroused state, the penises are virtually the same.

Based on these factors, generally speaking, neonatal

circumcision remains a healthier choice. Parents who choose to circumcise their newborn sons can do so with the confidence that they are making a good decision for the health and safety of their child.

One final note: While I do recommend infant circumcision, I do not recommend circumcision for my adult uncircumcised patients unless a medical problem warrants it, such as persistent irritation, infection, rash or the inability to retract the foreskin for cleaning. Adult circumcision is quick, simple and safe when performed by an experienced and qualified urologist.

Dudley Seth Danoff, MD, FACS, *is president and founder of the Cedars-Sinai Tower Urology Group in Los Angeles, a Diplomate of the American Board of Urology, a Fellow of the American College of Surgeons, and the author of two books on men's health.*

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7 Concerns About Christians and Tipping

The following is a true story. Granted, it happened several years ago. But I wonder how often such scenarios unfold.

Two pastors were at lunch together. The older pastor paid for their previous meal, so the younger pastor picked up the tab for this meal. The younger pastor paid cash for the meal, so his older friend asked if he had included a tip. He said he forgot the tip, so he put some cash on the table.

As they were departing, the younger pastor said he forgot something, and returned to the restaurant. The other pastor saw him through the window. The younger man went back to the

table, picked up the cash, and put it in his pocket.

Hopefully, such stories are rare. But we do have reasons to be concerned when church members and Christian leaders treat restaurant servers and other service employees so poorly.

Allow me to outline seven key concerns:

1. Tipping is an opportunity we may not otherwise have. We have social contact with people with whom we may not interact on a regular basis. This is our opportunity to represent the name of Christ well. God has put these people in our paths for a reason.

2. Our generosity is one way we point people toward Christ. We demonstrate our priorities with the ways we spend money. We have seen in numerous studies that churches with a passion and heart for their communities are the churches making a difference. We can’t have a positive witness with a greedy attitude.

3. We can help counter some of the negative impact of other church members. A server in a restaurant told me she hated working the Sunday lunch shift. She said church members were the rudest and stingiest customers she encountered. Our positive witness with a generous tip can counter some of the negativity caused by others.

4. Generous tipping reflects a compassionate and grateful heart. Many servers work long hours and endure verbal abuse on a regular basis. Often their pay is very low. They may depend on tips to make ends meet. When we tip generously, we are demonstrating compassion for these servers, and we are expressing our gratitude for their service.

5. Most of us are blessed with abundance. We should be generous with that which God has given us. Healthy tipping is thus a matter of evangelistic witness and wise stewardship.

6. Generous tipping can reinforce positive conversations with servers. If we are kind to servers, and if we speak with graciousness and gratitude toward them, our witness is reinforced when we tip generously.

7. Poor tipping can be a negative witness that takes time to overcome. A few years ago, several people in my organization went to lunch together. They tipped very poorly. The server wrote on Facebook about these employees with clear reference to our organization. Our witness was thus compromised with the server and with the public in general.

I have little patience with those who are stingy to servers. If we can afford to eat out, we can afford to tip generously. Church leaders would do well to remind their members about this often-neglected topic of witness in the community.

By the way, the older pastor in the story I began above went back to the restaurant and apologized to the server. He also left her a 100 percent tip.

It is both amazing and tragic how the simple act of tipping can affect our witness in the communities in which we live. What do you think about this topic? Let me hear from you.

Thom S. Rainer *is the president of LifeWay Christian Resources. For the original article, visit* thomrainer.com.

What I Learned From 13 Months in My Personal Noah's Ark

I'll always remember my time in Noah's ark. It was one of the most miserable seasons of my life. I entered Noah's ark after

a 40-day spiritual flood swept away everything I had—my home, my car, my job, my dog, my savings.

I was stripped of everything I thought I needed. I had to start all over again—and God sent me to the backside of nowhere to do it. In Noah's Ark, I learned to walk with Him and Him alone. I learned to pray. I learned to worship. I learned to study the Bible. I did quite a lot of dying to self. God reprogrammed my life in Noah's ark.

Of course, I wasn't literally on Noah's ark. I'm old but not that old! I'm actually talking about Ozark, Alabama. When my daughter was 3 years old, she thought Ozark was called "Noah's Ark." I didn't realize until 13 years later the prophetic implications of that cute misunderstanding.

How I Landed on Noah's Ark

Let me back up. I landed in Noah's ark a few weeks after I got saved. If you know anything of my testimony, you know I was put in jail for a crime I didn't commit a few months after my husband abandoned me with our then-2-year-old daughter. Traveling evangelists rolled through the jail preaching Jesus and, having descended far below rock bottom, I gave my heart to Christ.

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As the story goes, the district attorney wanted to put me away for 5 years. Thank God, He vindicated me completely for the injustice but when I was finally released I had lost my apartment, my job, my friends, my money, and my dog. Yes, I know. It sounds like a sad country song. And I am not a fan of country songs.

Again, God sent me to the backside of the desert, to Noah's ark, Alabama, to start a new life. I'm a city girl. Noah's ark is a rural community with about 13,000 people. There's not even a McDonald's, and only one sit-down restaurant. There's

not even a brand name grocery store or pharmacy. Don't get me wrong. It's a lovely little town in many respects but it was like living in a foreign city where nobody spoke my language.

Misery With No Company

I was miserable. I imagine Noah and those with him in the ark were also miserable. Think about it for a minute. They were crammed into a big boat with two of every living creature. I've heard of cruise ships getting stuck out at sea and the stench was so horrid that people were vomiting from the smell. Noah's ark had to smell worse.

You might say I was in a crappy situation. I still had no friends, no money, no husband, and no job. After making over $3,000 a week at the height of the dot-com bubble I had to swallow my pride and apply for government assistance just to put food on the table. Everything I once had was stripped from me and I hated Noah's Ark, Alabama.

In fact, I was so miserable that I used to walk down the street to the street drain, sit down and bawl right in the middle of the neighborhood—then get up and walk back home and cry some more. I wasn't sure if I was shipwrecked or floating in a great flood of trial and tribulation. Either way, I could not see a light at the end of the tunnel. As a new believer, I could not see how God was ordering my steps or fulfilling Romans 8:28 in my life.

Learning to Surrender

I hated just about every minute of my time in Noah's Ark. After 13 months passed, my daughter was 5 years old and it was time to enroll her in elementary school. I dreaded the day because I knew it meant putting down roots in this dreaded place.

I prayed. I cried. I worried and wondered. Finally, I surrendered. I said something like this to God, "OK, fine. If

you want me to stay here in stinky, smelly Noah's Ark for the rest of my life, I'll do it. You win. I give up."

Would you believe it wasn't a week later when I got a call from an aviation magazine in South Florida with a job offer to serve as editor? It was one of my best freelance clients and the current editor was leaving for a new position. The only catch: I had to report for duty in two weeks. This was my way of escape!

Rewards for Obedience

I drove down to South Florida, got a realtor, and started looking for apartments. The realtor took me to the 11th floor of a condo on the beach, which I told her I could not afford. When I stepped out onto the balcony and looked at the ocean view, the Holy Spirit said three words to me that changed my life forever: "This is yours."

I had the gall to argue with the Holy Spirit, telling Him I could not afford the $1,000 a month rent (my rent in Noah's Ark was only $450). He told me He could afford it.

I signed the lease, moved everything I had down south, and my daughter started elementary school in Hollywood, Florida a couple of weeks later. Today, I live in the Promised Land. I own two condos debt-free with ocean views—but I don't think I ever would have come this far without passing through Noah's Ark, Alabama.

I don't know what your Noah's ark looks like (or smells like) but here's the lesson: You have to find contentment in the ark before God will deliver you to your Promised Land. Consider the words of the apostle Paul when he was in his Noah's Ark—knee deep in sewage in a jail.

"I have learned in whatever state I am to be content. I know both how to face humble circumstances and how to have abundance. Everywhere and in all things I have learned the

secret, both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need. I can do all things because of Christ who strengthens me" (Phil. 4:11-13). Amen.

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Can You Get Fit While Reading a Book?

"Reading is to the mind what exercise is to the body." –Joseph Addison

At an early age, we were taught to write and read at a rudimentary level. We meticulously formed each letter of the alphabet over and over again until we became proficient enough to do it during nap time.

We learned that a horizontal line above a vowel gives it a "long" sound, while a u-shaped symbol above denotes a "short" sound. Listening to our parents or teachers read to us was often the highlight of our day. We felt the magic of our imaginations taking flight as stories and characters flickered to life in our mind's eye.

During elementary school, it was our turn to take books into our own hands. We tackled book reports (my first was on *Frog and Toad Are Friends* by Arnold Lobel), used learning software such as Accelerated Reader that awarded us each time we aced a quiz, and took weekly trips to the library that further emphasized the importance of reading and, in many students, nurtured a swiftly blossoming love for literature.

Middle school and high school turned up the heat with higher-level works that were a far cry from the Beverly Cleary and "Superfudge" books of our easy-going, elementary days. *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer, The Great Gatsby,* Homer's *The Iliad,* and other classics introduced to us the *discipline* of learning. We studied literary and rhetorical devices, dissected Shakespearean sonnets, wrote thousand-word essays, prepared for Socratic seminars, and altogether racked our brains in the pursuit of being well-read and therefore well-rounded and well-educated.

After college, reading is no longer a requirement, and sadly, many of us retire our books to the shelves and turn to the Internet, our TVs, cell phones and other devices to keep our minds occupied outside of work. After more than a decade spent reading for work, "reading for pleasure" somehow seems oxymoronic.

A 2013 HuffPost poll showed that out of 1,000 participants, 28 percent of those surveyed hadn't read a book in over a year. The follow-up HuffPost article endorsed the undervalued hobby of reading, pointing out a few of its benefits, such as:

- Slowing down Alzheimer's
- Enhancing your memory
- Expanding your vocabulary (thereby making you an articulate speaker)
- Helping you empathize with other people and cultures

If those reasons aren't enough to make you pick up a book (or

download one to your iPad), consider these impressive health-related reading facts:

Reduces Depression

This year in *PLOS One*, a study was published indicating patients who combined support sessions with reading self-help books showed lower level of depression than patients who only received traditional treatments.

Fights Stress

Reading can also lower stress levels. Researchers with the University of Sussex found that reading was the "most effective way to overcome stress," more effective than listening to music, having a cup of tea, or going for a walk.

Prevents Mental Decline

Reading can keep you sharp, and not just because you might be acquiring new knowledge in your books. Elderly people who read experienced slower mental decline than those who didn't. It's noteworthy that those who engaged in *infrequent* mental activity exhibited mental decline 48 percent faster than the control group.

Like working out, it may take time for you to find pleasure in reading. It may seem difficult to let the world go quiet and just focus on the rhythm of printed words for a while; you may not even like your selected story at first. But if you keep with it, and you find a genre or author that resonates with you, I can almost guarantee that you will find reading to be a truly rewarding and enjoyable pastime that you greatly look forward to, much like you did when you were young, when neither physical activity nor story time seemed a burden.

“There’s so much more to a book than just reading.” —Maurice Sendak