

Finding Freedom in Parenting

My dog Blueberry has cost me a lot of money in the last few months. We've been in dog obedience school. And, boy, do I mean we. We're now on our second dog trainer. Our first dog trainer was very disciplined. He could flatten his hand in a downward motion, and his dog would lay down one hundred yards away. Blueberry . . . not so much. She and I both have a hard time remembering which command goes with which hand motion and what it's all supposed to mean.

I tell her, "Down," and she tries to shake. I tell her to sit, and she puts her front paws on my shoulders to try to hug me. It's all very confusing. But there's one command that has been particularly mysterious to both of us, especially as I've written this chapter.

"Free."

The first trainer told me that after Blueberry has been "in a down" or "in a sit" for a given period of time, I'm supposed to say, "Free." When I first said it, Blueberry just looked at me. She tilted her head in a "what in the world does that mean" kind of way. I didn't know either. We both just shrugged.

Now she's getting the hang of it. I think she's partly getting the hang of it because of our new trainer. She is more of a positive reinforcement than negative reinforcement type of trainer. She took away the "obedience" collar Blueberry wore and replaced it with treats.

One trip from Nashville to Kentucky in the car necessitates an entire bag of treats. I think, though, it's helped Blueberry feel more loved. And more secure. And it's given her more confidence in what free truly means. When I say, "Free," Blueberry now knows that she can run and play, or find her ball, or give me a hug, or whatever she wants to do. She is

free because she's loved and secure and no longer afraid of punishment.

I think I'm a lot like Blueberry. When I first started thinking about freedom in parenting, I was perplexed. Free? What does that mean in terms of parenting? I mentioned in a speech recently that instead of focusing on being the parent God's called you to be, you can focus on being the parent God frees you to be. It sounds good. But I really wasn't even sure what I meant at the time.

After studying this idea of freedom, I think I know a lot more now. And that's basically that I'm free. Like Blueberry, I'm free to love and laugh and dance and teach and counsel and write, because I'm loved. I'm also free to discipline. You are too, as a parent. But so often we live with the confusion that Blueberry and I did. We turn our heads, shrug our shoulders, and stay in the sit position for entirely too long.

Let me give another example, and one that involves a human child rather than a furry one. You need a little background first, though. I attend an Anglican church. It's one of the more progressive Anglican churches where they intersperse hymns with worship choruses. Church members are very engaged in the service, although there isn't a ton of outward expression. Suffice it to say most people are not waving flags and dancing in the aisles. Most. So on this particular day, I was sitting in my pew toward the back of the church. It was the last song of the service, which usually is a rousing, anthemic song, such as "In Christ Alone" or "Mighty to Save."

Most of the church was on their feet . . . on their feet in their pews, I should say. But there was a ten-year-old girl toward the front of the church who was just not having the stuffy standing around any longer. She was out, in the aisle, dancing freely. I watched her for a few minutes, and then saw a woman I guessed was her mom quickly moving toward her from

the back of the church. "Uh oh," I thought. "That's not going to last long." Her mom walked up to her daughter, took her hand, and then—it was as if I watched this moment pass over the mom's face—she started dancing too.

Free.

I have to admit that I was shocked. I fully expected that mother to put her daughter right back in the pew. But maybe that's because I'm not very free myself. I think, in that moment, the mother made a decision. "Should I make her sit in the pew beside me or should I join in her worship? Is it more important to not look foolish in front of people, or to respond to what I feel stirring inside me with my daughter? Does it matter to me what they think? Do I really feel free?"

It could have gone either way. It could have been that the mother saw her daughter's dance as an attempt to get attention. She could have been embarrassed for her daughter and embarrassed for herself. But in that moment, she chose to believe and act on something different.

Free.

As a parent, this idea may be one of the most difficult to live out. You may be more like Blueberry and me. Free? What is that supposed to mean? I have to have a healthy dinner on the table by 6:00, make sure my son is ready for his spelling test, plan the perfect party for my daughter's tenth birthday, call my mother, walk the dog, exercise, and spend the few minutes left over with my husband. How can you be free in the midst of that much pressure?

(This is an excerpt from Intentional Parenting: Autopilot is for Planes. You can win a copy of the book by joining Spirited Woman on Facebook. Click [here](#) to enter have your name entered in the drawing for this book by telling us you would like a copy of the book. The winner will be announced on Facebook.)

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