

Tricia Lott Williford



let's
pretend
we're
normal

Adventures in Rediscovering How to Be a Family

Praise for
Let's Pretend We're Normal

“Without being preachy or prescriptive, this book is loaded with practical insights that Tricia Williford seamlessly embeds within her charming storytelling. Tricia provides inspiration through authenticity by never shrinking from pain or hyping success. *Let's Pretend We're Normal* is an honest look at the often messy, sometimes joyful, and always loving work of being a family.”

—JOHN COTTON RICHMOND, human-trafficking
prosecutor and former director of International Justice
Mission's slavery work in India

“Don't miss this one! Tricia Williford, a young widow with boys to raise, writes with honesty and humor about mining the beauty of life after 'happily ever after' meets 'I never saw this coming.'”

—SHELLIE RUSHING TOMLINSON, author of *Heart Wide
Open: Trading Mundane Faith for an Exuberant Life
with Jesus*

“Tricia Williford has found a way to sort through her grief, find treasures in the darkness, and then articulate it all in a way that's tangible and life-giving for those still in the valley. *Let's Pretend We're Normal* gives you an inside look at the everydayness of a family still finding their way after a significant loss. If you find yourself sorting through the aftermath of heartache or tragedy, you'll find a new friend in Tricia, who's still sorting through her loss with honesty and heartfelt sincerity.”

—SUSIE LARSON, radio host, speaker, and author of *Your
Beautiful Purpose*

let's
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ALSO BY TRICIA LOTT WILLIFORD

And Life Comes Back



Tricia Lott Williford

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Adventures in Rediscovering How to Be a Family



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Details in some anecdotes and stories have been changed to protect the identities of the persons involved.

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For my mom and dad



You make me happy when skies are gray.

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prologue

Once upon a time there was a Curly Girl. When she was in college, she fell in love with Mr. Responsible, and they were engaged to be married just three months after they met, even though Curly Girl still can't believe anyone approved that engagement at age nineteen, because who were these kids kidding that they knew all about love? Anyway, Curly Girl turned twenty-one on their honeymoon, and this couple started a lovely—albeit young!—life together.

Curly Girl and Mr. Responsible had two children: Athlete and Artist. Athlete and Artist were born accomplices; in perpetuity, one had an idea, the other agreed, and the instigator could almost never be identified with complete accuracy.

For almost four thousand days, Curly Girl and Mr. Responsible lived the complicated, beautiful life of marriage. They woke up next to each other and kissed each other good night. They were honest and dishonest and unfiltered and guarded. They were kind and unkind to each other, often in the same day and somehow all at the same time. They took each other for granted, which is one of the hidden gifts of life together: the forgetting to appreciate. He took care of her in ways she didn't know; she brought color to his life in shades he didn't recognize. He was measured and careful; she was spontaneous and impulsive. He held the string to her kite; she was the air in his balloon.

Mr. Responsible died, suddenly and tragically. He was sick for only twelve hours. Doctors thought he had the flu. Nobody knew that he had an infection in his bloodstream and had become toxic to himself. A thief named sepsis stole his breath and his heartbeat, and his spirit slipped right through Curly Girl's fingers, even as she tried to save him on the floor of their bedroom only two days before Christmas.

In the course of one day, Curly Girl became the widowed, single mom of two children not yet in kindergarten. She lost her husband, her confidence, and nearly her faith. Curly Girl's world became very small, and she began to piece together a broken life one meal and one word at a time. Her two boys, Athlete and Artist, learned too much too soon: death is real, a parent can die, sometimes God says no, and heaven is a place that isn't here. They saved their mother's life by giving her a reason to live at all. A family of four became a trio, a braided cord with frayed edges but a tight knot.

Some stories finish with "And they all lived happily ever after." Other stories continue to write themselves. Scars don't go away, but life grows deeper than the scars and reveals a landscape that includes them. Boys grow taller, hearts grow stronger, the sun still shines, and life comes back. The opposite of death is creating, and an end can be followed only by a beginning. Curly Girl, Athlete, and Artist are living with joy and staying in the moment with a smattering of cake batter, finger paints, soccer practice, and unmade beds.

They're making it up as they go and rediscovering how to be a family, one adventure at a time.

Part One



“i will do this!”

When the worst thing you feared has happened to you, you can fool yourself into thinking you're out of the woods for any other tragic loss. You can tell yourself you've done your time, you went through hell and survived, and lightning surely won't strike the same family twice. This little white lie can help you begin to live again. This invincibility can give you the courage to do small things, like step out of your home or go to the grocery store or sleep at night. You might even begin to lean on this sense of security and start to try bigger things—like driving to a new city. Or taking your children on a hike in the mountains.

Sometimes the facade of safety is the biggest risk of all.

We live in Colorado, where the options for hikes and bike rides and day trips are endless. I mean, really, it begins to feel like poor stewardship if you don't get out and do stuff. I feel as if I shouldn't even get to live here if I'm not going to enjoy the sunshine and the thin air, as if someone might revoke my citizenship if I don't show my appreciation for this recreation mecca. With all this in mind, I decided to prove my courage, independence, and worth in Colorado by taking my boys on a hike.

I chose an “easy hike.” Not a “big-deal hike.” And certainly nothing that required equipment of any kind. In a book about hikes where they rate them from easy to hard with one to four stars, this route would get a half star. Rather than choosing to

climb a mountain, I chose a path that would take us down through a craggy ravine right on the edge of a golf course. I took my phone and some sunscreen, and we set out to make a memory.

The experts on young men say that boys need a beauty to win and a battle to fight, and I assure you that taking their mom into the wilderness fit the bill on many levels. My guys felt—and acted—like the fearless duo of Indiana Jones and Buzz Lightyear. In their surge of masculine confidence, they asked if they could hike on their own for just a while, for just a little way.

Remember that sense of invincibility? It's not always your friend. For example, in this moment it would have been smart to say, "I love this great idea, guys, and while I totally believe in you and applaud your crazy courage, I'll go ahead and stay with you everywhere we go today."

But I didn't say that, because I was riding the wave of invincibility.

Together we chose a picnic table where I would sit and wait for them. I always have a book with me and zero qualms about having a few more minutes to read. I promised not to move so they could be sure to find me again, and they promised to stay together so I could be sure this wasn't the worst idea ever. See, while the downside of having boys less than two years apart is the fact that they each have a built-in accomplice to break any rule, the upside is that they also have a built-in bodyguard and teammate for any adventure. I could send them off together with the knowledge that one would truly lay down his life for the other. Or at least lay some serious threats against anyone or anything that

threatened to come between the two brothers. So you can imagine my alarm when Tucker, the oldest at age nine, came back by himself. This was not the agreement.

Tucker didn't speak at all until he was three years old, and he and I worked long and hard in those early years to find his voice and vocabulary. So in the face of a trauma, the first thing that goes are his words. It's as though an emergency raises the drawbridge between his brain and his mouth. While he is keenly aware of everything happening around him, he is frozen in speechlessness. He cannot tell his side of the story.

This is particularly problematic when he's involved in any kind of altercation with a child in the neighborhood or on the playground. When a teacher questions the boys on what happened, there stands my silent child, who is strong and smart, a gentle giant just like his dad, without words to explain why he pushed a bully.

On that warm afternoon on the craggy cliff, he stood before me with his pleading eyes, and all he could offer for explanation was his brother's name.

"Tyler. Tyler. Mommy . . . Tyler."

Even though I knew he didn't have the words, and even though I knew he was saying everything he could say, my instinct begged for more information, and I peppered him with questions. "Where is Tyler? Is he okay? What happened? Tell me, Tuck. Tell me. It's okay, buddy. Show me. Just show me."

He took my hand and led me along the path they had followed. But before long one rock looked just like another, and we

were lost. I could hear Tyler's cries echoing through the small canyon, but I couldn't find him. I called to him, "I'm coming, Tyler! I will find you, buddy!" I could only hope he could hear me.

Tuck and I climbed over giant rocks, lowering ourselves farther and farther into the canyon, following the sounds of Tyler's crying voice calling for me. Let me tell you, it was one of those times when the objective was so clear and my mind was focused on one task, but my thoughts unfolded into a dozen questions.

Should I call 911? Should I at least call my parents? But I'm losing my cell-phone signal, so if I am going to call, I have to stop climbing long enough to make a phone call, and I can't stop trying to find him for even one second. What if I get trapped where he is and I can't get help? Should I call for help before I lose my phone signal? How would anyone even find us if I can't find my own son? I wonder if they would send a helicopter down here for us. What if we are stranded in this stupid canyon for days? What if we are left to spend the night with the mountain lions? I have to find my child.

Hell hath no fury like a mother concerned, and a mama bear will literally scale a mountain to find and protect her red-headed cub. I would later look back on it all and be impressed with my own clarity—and upper-body strength. I spotted the very top of his marigold head—this was a moment when I was most thankful for his vibrant orange-red hair—far, far down the canyon. I made a beeline for him, scrambling as fast and as hard as a city girl can climb downhill over giant boulders. When I finally got close to my son, I still couldn't reach him; he had climbed onto a small ledge that was only wide enough for his two feet. I lay down on

my stomach and stretched my Go-Go-Gadget arms over the side to reach his hands.

I lifted Tyler over the rock and into my arms. I scooped Tucker into the huddle, and together we caught our breath. As I held him and soothed him, hikers gathered around us. It turns out they too had followed the cries of the little boy. When you see strangers who are sweating because they want to help you rescue your child, it's enough to restore your faith in humanity. They gave us just a moment to hold on to one another and feel the solid ground beneath our feet.

Now that the three of us were together again, the story unfolded, and I learned what had happened. In my theory of safety in numbers, I had neglected to factor in the variable of disagreement. There's a tension between the compliant one who follows the rules and the creative one who tests the boundaries. I have one who likes to play it safe and obey, and I have one who likes to see just how far he can bend the rules without actually disobeying. Tucker felt they had ventured far enough, and Tyler wanted to go farther. Tucker remembered the rule to stay together, so he continued to follow his brother lower and lower into the canyon. Though he felt that it would be safer to stop, his brother felt plenty safe to keep going. In my experience, when a strong-willed younger sibling has the opportunity to take the lead, he's going to. Every time. So Tyler led the two of them right down the side of the canyon.

I needed to take a deep breath and regroup. In my fear I was looking for someone to blame and some consequences to enforce, but then I realized nobody had actually disobeyed or done anything wrong. It was just a classic dilemma of curiosity taking a boy

a bit too far. We climbed back to safety together, and my adrenaline level began to ease down. The boys, resilient as they are, found their adventurous spirit almost right away. They were climbing, jumping, and skipping, and I was trudging along behind them in silence. I just wanted to get everybody back to the car and, quite frankly, teleported all the way home.

Tyler asked, “Mommy, why aren’t you happy? Where is your joy? I thought you would be happy because I am safe.”

“I am very, very happy that you are safe.”

“Well, you don’t *seem* very happy.”

I stopped and brought the two explorers near me. “Listen. When you were afraid, you were able simply to be afraid. But when I was afraid, I couldn’t let myself feel just that emotion. I had to choose to be brave and to think so I could rescue you. I couldn’t sit down and cry and feel afraid, even though I was terrified that you were hurt or that I had lost you forever. You’re okay now, and I know that. My spirit is very, very thankful that you are okay. But my mind has to catch up, Tyler. I need time to feel all the things you felt while you were afraid.”

Also, my love, consider this to be a free lesson in the class called “Inside a Girl’s Mind.” Don’t rush my emotions.

“Okay, Mommy. I’ll give you time.”

They scampered ahead with the sure feet of a couple of deer. I walked behind them, chastising myself for thinking we were strong enough, brave enough, wilderness-aware enough to go on this simple hike in the first place. *What were you thinking, Tricia? This was Robb’s realm. Hikes, nature, outdoors, and boy adventures—those were his domain. Go ahead and put a red X on the checklist of*

things you've tried, and now take it off the list of things you'll ever do again. You can't do this. Adventure is not yours.

I am prone to making hasty judgments with extreme statements like that. It wasn't until later that I could gain a different perspective. Actually, I *had* braved the hike. I could, and I did. We made it through the adventure, and I had learned something more about my sons and myself. Instead of crossing this off the list of things I will ever do again, perhaps I could file it under the category of things I can and might do just a little bit differently. In the face of the emergency, I had been able to *stay calm*, to *step up* as my children needed me to, to *keep from putting anyone at risk*, and to *live to tell about it*.

I realized that's kind of a four-step guide for this entire journey—and maybe any journey at all.

Stay calm.

Step up as needed.

Don't put anyone at risk.

Live to tell about it.



So when the people who make books asked me to write a book about parenting, I held up one finger in dispute, both to say "Hold on one minute, please; let's not get ahead of ourselves" and "Let me start with one solid reason why I should not write a book on parenting: I don't know what I'm doing."

Understand, I'm playing this whole gig one day at a time. I make a million mistakes, and I'm not sure you should do this the way I'm doing it. My kids live on a balanced diet of technology

and Lunchables. I love them with my whole heart, and I am a walking mess most of the time. For crying out loud, just this morning I found a pair of my socks outside in the flower bed, the heels worn through in crusty holes, because my son wears my socks when he rides his skateboard. And when I say he “rides his skateboard,” I mean that he sits on it to ride down the sidewalk, and when he needs to slow down, he brakes with his feet—the shoeless feet that are wearing my socks.

I am learning as I go. And aren't we all? Aren't parents just kids who grew up and had kids? What on earth would make me an expert to speak into anyone else's life about how to run this marathon? So, will I write a book on parenting? No, not if it's a book that prescribes how to be a better parent.

Which brings me to another reason and a second finger to raise in my argument. I think one of the heavier burdens I could give my children is my own book on how to parent. Then they might grow up under a microscope, under close inspection of a world watching to see if they indeed are maturing into men of integrity and leaders in their family and community. I sincerely pray every day that they become such leaders, but that's not what this book is about. Actually, I'm not sure their outcome as men of integrity has a whole lot to do with who I am as their mom, so I don't claim much business in writing about it.

And then the book people rephrased the question. “Tricia, will you tell some stories about your journey as a mom?” Aha. Storytelling. Now, this—*this*—I can do. And that's how we got here, with you holding a book written by a young widow who is just trying to keep up with her kids.

So don't worry: I won't try to advise you on how to raise your kids. God knows all too well that I'm barely managing to figure that out myself. But I will do what I do—tell stories upon stories of what I have learned from real life in the trenches, life as I know it in many seasons: married or single; taking a paycheck or working at home; and doing my time in this parenting club, where we never take a day off, we work extra hours on holidays, we catch chewed food as it comes out of a child's mouth, and we eat our own meals over the kitchen sink.

A friend said to me not too long ago, "Tricia, you do realize this is your life, right? It's not just a story—this is your life." It's true. I'm living the story, and I don't know how it ends. I don't create; I notice. I watch and I learn, and then I write it down. And so this is a book of the many things I have noticed along this path—from my first days as a single parent, when I had no idea how I would survive one day on my own, when I could do only the next thing, adding minutes to hours and meals to days. I want to tell you about learning the secret to gentle confidence, rediscovering how to be a family, and finally looking in the rearview mirror and saying aloud to myself and my guys, "You know what? I think we're doing this. I think we're going to make it."

If you're okay with the honest and up-front caveat that I'm learning as I go, that I'm only pretending to be normal, then grab a flashlight and join me. And hold on tight. This gig is a bumpy road.



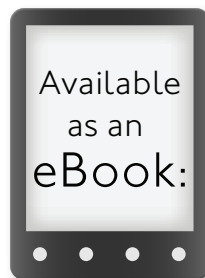
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