

# Blue Like Play Dough



the **shape** of motherhood  
in the **grip** of **God**

**TRICIA GOYER**



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## Prologue

**B**efore I knew play dough could be bought in the store, I remember playing with salt dough my mom had made. It was warm in my hands and it smelled yeasty, like the bakery downtown. I squished it and formed it into a tiny baby with chubby arms and legs. I loved dolls, and I loved imagining what it would be like when I would be a mom. Someday I'd have a baby of my own instead of a salt-dough creation.

But when I had kids, I felt like I was the one being squished and pressed. At times I felt like I was being poked as I tried to deal with the 101 needs of my kids. I felt stretched as I struggled through things I'd hoped I'd never have to face—like hospitalized children, disobedient children, lost children (more than once on all counts). I felt pulled when I tried to balance raising kids, taking care of our house, serving in church, and following my dreams. There were even days when I felt as if I was literally being pounded—by life, by my hang-ups, by my own insecurities and doubts that I was “good enough” as a mom.

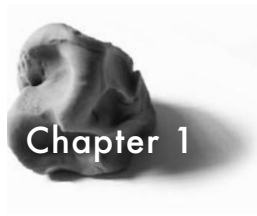
One day I was praying about all the hard stuff in life, and into my mind came an image of a blue lump of play dough. As I focused on it, I realized the lump wasn't something my kids or I held in our hands. Rather it was something God held in His. I was that lump. As I watched God pull and tug, I saw that He

was following a pattern. He had something in mind. God, the artist, was shaping me, forming me to represent an image of His Son.

The image was there, and then it was gone. Donald Miller had blue jazz. I had blue play dough. I tried not to be disappointed.

In each of our lives, there is molding and shaping to be done. Perhaps I needed more work than most, but as I look back on my life, I realize that if there is one thing that all the stretching and poking and smashing has taught me, it's that I never want to be anywhere but in the grip of God.

I still often ask Him to rescue me from the pressures that come with being a mom. For the most part, He doesn't. Instead, if I'm willing, He uses them to change me on the inside. In His hands I'm being transformed, one squeeze at a time.



# In the Middle of My Mess

I never thought I could meet God here. In my home. In my mess. In the midst of my ordinary suburban life. To me, God was someone you met at church or connected with at weekly Bible study. I knew deep down it was possible to have mountaintop moments, but I believed they came during weeklong spiritual retreats, hourlong morning Quiet Times, and a once-a-year women's conference.

Instead, I found God in surprising places. I found Him as I sat on the couch cuddling with my three-year-old and reading *Goodnight Moon* for the 2,345th time. He spoke to me as I made dinner and even as I stuffed laundry into rickety dresser drawers. I heard Him in the midst of my untidy, desperately-in-need-of-a-reorg life. I found God, experienced Him...well...while mixing Kool-Aid and playing with play dough.

And it's a good thing God allowed Himself to be found there, because as a mom my opportunities for solitude,



contemplation, and three hymns and a prayer are few and far between.

I used to think the ones who knew God best were nuns and monks who lived high in the hills. I imagined it must be hard for such people to separate themselves and to give up so much. What they had, I believed, was true devotion and an ultimate connection with God. Everyone else—those of us who lived ordinary lives—missed out. Well, I don't think that anymore.

Yes, I still think nuns and monks are devoted people, but in a way they have it easy. They find God in routines and rituals. They talk to God because there is no one else around. They don't have to deal with bad drivers cutting them off and then flipping them off. Or with grass stains on a *new* pair of capris that actually fit and don't make their butts look too big. Or with a child practicing her name one hundred times on the bathroom floor in permanent marker. Sure, their prayers sound eloquent, but a mom's prayers for a sick baby are just as pious and maybe more passionate.

In my way of thinking the most devoted people are moms who whisper prayers for their neighbor, their friend, and their brother (who's messing up yet again) while watching their kids play in the sandbox. Moms who try to read their Bibles while *Dora the Explorer* is blaring on the TV in the next room. Moms who stop to talk with an elderly man at the grocery store about the creamed corn, not because they even like creamed corn, but because they want to show a lonely person the love of Jesus.

I think God would agree. I believe He sees the challenges and the effort. He appreciates the smallest turning of our attention to Him or to others for Him.

Even though seeking God is worthy, that doesn't mean it's easy or natural. In fact, it almost seems wrong to squeeze God into the middle of a busy, ordinary life. God is BIG. My pursuits are small. God is GLORIOUS. Scrubbing sinks and changing poopy diapers is not. Nor is pushing a shopping cart filled with teetering toiletries, humming "Girls Just Want to Have Fun" as the song plays through the store speakers.

I've read many books written by people who "went away with God." The authors often write about how God speaks to people in solitary, beautiful places. But not all the places He visits are beautiful. Or solitary. My life is proof of that.

Truth be told, it wasn't *I* who discovered *God*. He came down and met me where I was. It doesn't matter to Him that I can hardly see my desk under the piles of mail and bills and kids' craft projects. He doesn't care that I'm twenty pounds overweight (or maybe thirty, no matter what my driver's license says). He loves me just as I am. He knows my to-do list and that I'll never get to the end of it. Ever. God sees my heart. He understands that I'm trying to get my life in order so I can focus on family dinners and Bible reading times. He knows I'm working at not feeling envious that my neighbor is thinner than I am and has a better flower garden. My flaws neither surprise Him nor dissuade Him from entering my life.

It's not as if God says, "I was going to visit you today, but I think I'll wait until you balance that checkbook, clean out your fridge, and start that Bible study you've been meaning to get around to." God's not like that. He walked with dirty, smelly shepherds and hung out with jailed prophets, so I don't think my waist-high laundry pile is going to scare Him off.

Still, I struggle with feeling I have to clean up before I approach God. Organize my closets. Transform my kids. Rearrange my priorities. Renew my heart. I forget that God wants me just as I am. That belonging to Him is enough.

Like the prodigal son in Luke 15:11–32, I need to remember who my Father is. The kid had it all, and he threw it away. He was broke. He was hungry. He was dirty. He was a mess. Then he remembered his father and his home.

For the prodigal son, it wasn't just about going back to his home. It was also about letting his dad take care of him. I need to do the same. And if I took two minutes to think about it—as I'm doing now—I'd realize the perfection I long for will never be found in the place I live and parent and strive. It's found in who I turn to. In who is waiting for me with open arms.

The problem isn't whether God will show up. It's all about me not being aware that God is *already* here...that He has been in my life all along. And that He doesn't care about my mess. Sometimes I do better at remembering. And other times, well...



I live in a house with my husband, my grandma, my three teens, and a foreign exchange student we invited into our home just so we could make sure life didn't get too boring. That's seven people, each involved in numerous activities, each with his or her own schedule. Circles and scribbles and arrows fill my desk calendar. White spaces are few and far between. Daily life keeps me running. Add in volunteering at church and my work projects, and I wonder if it's possible to think, let alone contemplate.

While I'm no longer potty training and all my kids have learned to write and read and say please and thank you, I've discovered that every season comes with challenges of its own. Right now I'm in a season where little messes sprout up around me like dandelions on a manicured lawn. As soon as I try to cut one down, the seeds scatter and weeds sprout up in a dozen more places.

In the last two months, my nineteen-year-old son, Cory, had two knee surgeries (due to basketball injuries). And my daughter, Leslie, celebrated her sixteenth birthday with a "Never Been Kissed Party," which means that my years of lectures about abstinence and purity have paid off thus far. My youngest son, Nathan, has been helping me housebreak a dog that for the past year has assumed the downstairs bathroom was his potty spot too.

I used to think stumbling over LEGO blocks was irritating. Now I live with a teen driver, a social butterfly, and a child who must believe that showers spray acid, judging by the lengths he

takes to avoid them. On a daily basis, I'm not sure who is going where with whom...or if any of my kids are clean enough to be going out at all!

When I read the familiar Scripture verse, "Be still, and know that I am God," my stomach knots and my thoughts bounce around like a Ping-Pong ball on steroids. Even as I try to focus on the words, my mind wanders to the phone calls I need to return. I find myself trying to stack and restack the piles in order to make them seem more appealing and not quite so overwhelming.

Yet I know this verse doesn't necessarily mean I have to still my body in order to connect with God. In the middle of my busy life, I can refocus my thoughts and my mind and my heart on Him. I can be fixed on God, even when my feet are hustling. I can look for Him, listen for Him, even if the looking and listening happen in the short drive I take to pick my daughter up from her job at a fast-food restaurant. Or in the prayers I offer up as I shave my legs in the shower.

Being still is trusting that when I do fill the white space with some quiet moments (which I try to do daily), God will have something better in store for me and my kids than what I could've come up with on my own. (Like the afternoon when, instead of cleaning off my desk, I took my daughter to coffee. That inner urging led to great conversation about issues I didn't realize Leslie was dealing with.)

Being still is realizing that even though the world is traveling around me at breakneck speed, sometimes—most times—

God's schedule is in the horse-and-buggy mode. Just because life is moving faster and my needs are growing like kernels of popcorn in the microwave, it doesn't mean that God *has to* answer my urgent prayers in the next .287 seconds. In fact, sometimes I think He holds off on purpose, because the greater my need, the more I seek Him. In the end the seeking and waiting and trusting may be more important than the answer.

The mess isn't going to get cleaned up today, but that doesn't mean I need to hold God at bay. He loves joining me, even if I'm placing Him into my chaos. In fact, if God had His way, I'm sure He'd write Himself into all parts of my life, using permanent marker, reminding me of where He wants to be—everywhere. In all of my life. And if I close my eyes, I can see His message in my day, in my life:

Insert God here.