We Learn to Walk by Falling: Portraits and Wisdom from Women

by Jennifer Townsend
Introduction

It has always seemed to me that there is a long tradition, going back to the beginning of history, of women being the true, if largely unacknowledged, head of the family. We pass on the real wisdom, the true secrets of the universe and how to live in it. This project was conceived out of this belief. My goal included combining my way of telling a story - visually, photographically - using the concept of oral histories and putting them together for my daughter, Wednesday, in a way that would last her lifetime, and hopefully her daughter's lifetime. I wished to photograph all of the women in our family that I could and ask them to offer their advice to future generations of women in general, or Wednesday, in particular.

My hope is that Wednesday will treasure this collection someday. I hope that she will pass it on to her children and that they, too, will enjoy looking through the pages and hearing her stories about each of the women smiling out at them there. By passing this book on, she, too, will be participating more directly in the project, her own epilogue of sorts, and carrying on the tradition of the women who came before her.
I am a mother of three, new grandmother, and have been married to my best-friend for twenty-six years. I have five brothers and sisters. My parents were hard-working, ethical people, who loved their children, and put their children's needs above their own. My family relationships have influenced the decisions I make as a county administrator of a human-services department. My family relationships have also shaped my world view. I love reading, music, and dancing. I love art that I like (not necessarily "good" art), I love sitting next to a fire on a cold day, and most similar contrasts. I love nature and when I am stressed--nature soothes me.

I love my family and friends. I'm so proud of the people they are and the challenges they have taken on. I love that my grandson has a sense of humor even before he can talk. I love diversity and all that I can learn from that. I believe in individual rights until they infringe upon others' rights. I love that Americans will come together to help people they don't know. I love God and I love science. I believe science supports the existence of God. I distrust organized religion, and I think Jesus would not approve of many of the things people do in his name. Jesus was understanding, tolerant, and forgiving. He stood up for the poor, criminals, and society's outcasts.

I hate man's inhumanity to man. I hate that extreme political positions in our country have blocked compromise and solutions to problems we all share. When it's all or nothing, it's usually nothing.

I've learned to be solution, instead of problem, focused. I've learned that it feels better and works better to view problems as challenges. I believe that most people do the best they can most of the time. I've learned you can't control most things but you can choose how you'll respond to them. I am still learning from my mistakes. Mistakes are okay if you don't keep repeating them.

I have hope for the future, because I know that most people want a better world for themselves and those they care about. I know that one day the women in our family will understand that the rights they have to vote, to choose whom they'll love, to be treated equally, to be safe, to make choices for themselves were hard-fought for by those who came before them.

For those of you who will come know that you come from kind, generous, smart, creative, courageous women. Carry on that family tradition and know you do not stand alone. You are the hope and love we carry in our hearts.

~Dawn McLaughlin
I just turned thirty-one this summer. Man, time flies. I have an amazing husband and was blessed with the sweetest little boy this spring. I love my little family. I am looking forward to watching us all grow old together. There is nothing in this world that matters more to me than my son. It melts my heart every time I hear him laugh and see him smile. I love to watch him learn new things and grow into a little man.

I have encountered a lot over the past thirty years. I've learned that life is not easy, but no matter how useless the fight may seem, never give up. I waited ten years to marry my best friend and it was well worth the wait. We waited another two years to have our son, the best gift ever given to us. If you want something, and are determined, anything can happen.

I hate "hatred." It really bothers me to see people be so negative and hurtful to and about each other. It breaks my heart and worries me what the future will look like for my son. There is so much violence, bullying, and hate crimes; why are people being so mean to each other? I think it is important for everybody to respect others as unique individuals, as no two people are exactly alike--there is no normal. I just wish people would be nice to each other and enjoy life.

Words of wisdom for future women of our family...

Enjoy each moment as it happens. As my mother always says, "Enjoy the journey." The path of life is not always straight, you may encounter several forks in the road and if you focus only on the destination, you may miss some really great experiences. Finally, be yourself and have confidence in who you are. You come from a long line of very strong women. Like anybody, we may encounter struggles, but we are resilient and will overcome obstacles.

~Becky Calvert
I've learned the meaning of my life: glorifying God in thought, word and action. This is my goal, of which I fall short each day, but it is at the foundation of who I am. I strive for it to define every relationship I have as mother, wife, sister, friend. If my kids take away nothing else from me, it's my greatest aspiration that they will take this foundation and make it their own, make it a stronger one than I've made for myself.

Don't we all have a lifetime of gems that fit in the category of "Things I Love?" So hard to offer just a sampling so if it's made it into this little paragraph, it must be paramount: discovering a word I've never seen before, watching my kids demonstrate kindness, politics, silence, music (thankfully one doesn't need to be able to carry a tune to be touched by music), my husband's respect, my country (my grandparents chose this country above all others), scary movies (This was an appreciation taught by my siblings so all the more cherished), history (role models and adventures and lessons to last a lifetime in the learning of it), courage and independence (so much so, that my children are named for them), the holiness of the natural world, stoicism (learning the quiet beauty in it with each new burden, each new loss), quick-wittedness, books ("No man can be called friendless if he has the companionship of God and good books" said Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and so it is), solitude, arguing.

Things I hate: applying the term "normal" to human behavior and ability, indifference of others toward things I love, impatience toward someone who's trying their hardest, that tone of voice, big government, moral relativism, victimhood, whatever your idea of "fair" is, my quick temper, entitlement, hypocrisy, arguing.

Some words of wisdom: Life isn't fair! The good news is that hardship can teach you to persevere, perseverance builds character, and character defines your ability to respond to future hardships. If you choose to use "unfairness" as an excuse, then excuses will define you.

~Allison Hutchings
Be grateful every day, even for the simplest of things.

Don't give up.

We learned to walk by falling, but we got up each time. We have to do the same throughout our lives.

Whether you make a decision or not, there are consequences.

When in doubt--don't. Listen to the inner voice.

Time is priceless, do not waste it.

Everything comes with a price, there is no free lunch.

Treat others as you want to be treated.

Life is short. Live it well. Do no harm.

To have family is a blessing, cherish it.

~Toni Renoos
Everything I am and everything I do is based around my faith in God. He is my Light and my Salvation ... my All in All. God has given me many gifts and talents. I believe we've all been given gifts and talents and it is our duty to find ways of sharing them with others. A creative imagination, compassion for others, organization and working with numbers, crafts, singing, teaching: these are just a few of the gifts He has blessed me with and I love using these gifts to benefit others.

I've always been a unique individual. Some would call me crazy. I love to laugh and spend time with people that love to laugh. Through Christ I have an inner joy even during the hard times of life. It has taken me many years to learn to "be myself." Turning 50 I found new freedom. No longer did I feel that I had to act the way people expected me to. If I want to sing or dance or go barefoot, I do (even at church) ... friends expect the unexpected. As I quickly approach 60, I wonder what other facets of the real me will emerge. A fantastic journey!

My "words of wisdom" for others are: seek God in all situations, depend upon Him for everything, enjoy where you are in life right now, and be content with what you have and with who God made you to be. Never stop learning and growing spiritually.

~Jill Albert
I grew up in Galesburg, Michigan. My father, Grant Johnston, owned a department store, Grant’s, at the corner of Mill and Battle Creek Streets. The building now houses an antique mall. In 1951 Galesburg and Augusta high schools were consolidated and that was when I met Wednesday’s grandpa, Jon Townsend. We dated in high school. After graduation we went our separate ways. I enrolled at Albion College and Jon attended Western Michigan.

I married and lived in a suburb of Detroit. In the sixties very few wives and mothers worked outside the home. I broke the mold by substitute teaching and later working in Real Estate. After my divorce and with grown children I went back to school and was fortunate in finding employment with a major trucking company. In the early 80's the job market in Michigan was suffering. I was offered a job in Oklahoma and later transferred to Texas. I value that period in my life for the lessons learned and the friends I made.

Soon after returning to Michigan Jon and I resumed our friendship. It had been thirty years since we'd seen or talked to one other. We were married in 1987 and spent many happy years together in Michigan and Florida.

~Hattie Townsend
All girls should know that all you need is a good friend.

~Keira Collick
All girls should know that family comes first for everything.

~Katlin Collick
Every experience in your life shapes you into the person you become. So remember to think decisions through as they will impact you more than you realize at the time. But once you make a decision go for it whole heartedly. Do not regret things later--you can't change the past and it is why you are the person you have become. Instead, cherish all of your experiences as they are your wisdom in the future; instead of regret, realize what that experience taught you and move forward with your knowledge. Be true to yourself, your dreams and your happiness. If you cannot be happy with yourself you cannot be happy with someone else--true happiness comes from within yourself. No dream or aspiration is silly, so try new things, experience new places and enjoy your life.

~Shawn Collick
It's been my experience that if you say you are "suffering from" or a "victim of" (fill-in-the-blank) you take on the negative baggage and behavior that goes with those labels. The beautiful thing about being human is YOU choose who and what you are. Not your disease, your illness or the circumstances of your past or present. You wake up alive and determine your own course in life. We are our choices.

Over the years I have thought quite a bit about what it takes to be a survivor. Everyone speaks so often about the "fighters" and those who "struggle" daily against some insidious disease or condition or set of circumstances. But as of late I have begun to ponder the much stronger healing powers of what I call the three "A's": Acceptance, Adaptation, and Appreciation.

Once I learned to accept the fact that this degenerative, progressive, genetic condition is just another piece of who I am as a person I found it was easier to adapt to the new path my life has taken and to appreciate more fully just waking up alive.

A zest for life allows me to accept whatever comes my way. It gives me the ability to adapt in order to continue appreciating the people and things I love.

As sappy or simplistic as it may sound--we are our choices. Helping or hurting--the choice is always ours.

My Great-Grandmother Wilds was fond of saying, "You woke up alive didn't you? Then get out there and enjoy this day you have!"

I hope you always wake up alive!

~Candis Collick
In the past decade or so, I guess I became a grown-up. I always thought grown-ups were old, like my parents. They had jobs and did tedious things like yard work, laundry and dishes. They had mortgages and bills. They lectured and gave advice, and punished when necessary. They gave guidance and love and taught the meaning of responsibility.

So I guess now that's me. Wife, mother of five, mortgage holder, laundry doer, and lecturer (don't get me started)! But I am also a yoga instructor, a small business owner, an avid reader, a kayaker, a SCUBA diver, and a photographer. I am not old. Well, at least I don't feel that way.

Being a grown-up may mean being responsible and doing all those tedious things. But it also means discovering yourself. In my youth I was shy, unsure of myself--I tended to trust that others had a better idea of what I needed than I did. Getting older has given me a sense of confidence and security in my own wisdom and talent. I am the capable, creative, smart, successful, loving person I always wanted to be. That person was always inside, it just took the experience and perspective of a few years to allow me to see her.

So don't wait. You are smart, creative, talented, loving and kind, right now. Listen to your heart. Follow your instincts. Know your own likes and dislikes and don't be afraid to make them known. Find your passion. Be open to opportunity and possibility in all forms. With the right attitude, all the twists, turns, challenges, joys and sorrows of life will lead you to a place of happiness and satisfaction.

Sometimes I look at all that has happened in my life and think, "Whoa! How did I get here? This was not in the plan at all!"

But then I look at my life. Aaron, my strong, capable, loving husband. My kids, all five of them, growing up to be smart, talented successful individuals. My yoga journey, which has led to new friendships, business opportunities and the realization that I love teaching, something I never saw myself doing. My future holds a wealth of opportunities for adventure and learning.

I guess being a grown-up isn't so bad.

~Jill McLane Baker
To my beautiful, smart, kind-hearted daughter,

You are a true blessing from God. I hope you know how much you are loved. I love how you remain strong in your Faith and don't back down. My hope is that you will always remember you can do anything through Christ who strengthens you. There is an amazing plan for your life. You have purpose. Pursue the desires of your heart; they are there for a reason. There will be times when you feel defeated, or like you've failed. Just know that you have the strength within you to pick yourself up and to be victorious in all that you do. Nothing is ever so bad that you should lose hope. Try to stay positive and choose to be a cheerful person. People will try to bring you down for many different reasons, but let that be a motivator to prove them wrong! Stay true to yourself. Love yourself enough to choose right paths in your life. You are a daughter of God and just as I want all that is good and right for you, God wants that for you too. Always remember that! You are blessed to be a blessing. Use your talents, skills, and gifts to help other people. Smile at people when you pass by. Say hello. Those is the small things that can sometimes make someone's day. Choose happiness.

Most of all I want you to know that you are loved beyond measure and nothing you could ever do would make me love you any less! Keep smiling!

Love,
Mom

~Anna Baker
In the 15 years I've been around, I've learned some life lessons, but I have so much more to learn in the future! One thing I've learned is to not let all the little things get to you. Try not to stress and just have fun with everything you do. I have had a hard time letting little things such as school projects stress me out, but I realized it's held me back from enjoying it! So instead of making things something that I have to do, I try to make it something I want to do!

I've also learned that everything is better when you have a positive attitude! When you look at things with a positive attitude, you're more likely to enjoy it and be happier! It reflects on others too! When other people see you with such a positive outlook on everything, they are inspired! You could make someone's day by just being positive!

Even though I'm only 15, I've learned life lessons that have made me a better person. On the other hand, I have so much more to learn and I know that my amazing family will have many more lessons to pass on to me!

~Madison Baker
Dear Wednesday,

I think I will say a few words about kindness and respect for yourself and others. I know you are getting a lot of great advice from the women in your family about all kinds of things. You are so blessed to have all the smart, beautiful ladies in your family pass along the wisdom of their lives. A treasure for you of life, memories, and love.

I think kindness is so important to a happy life and it is something that is very important to me. Expectations--do something nice for someone just because you are a loving soul, not for something in return. If you do it for the right reason, it will come back to you with goodness and love.

People don't always need advice. Sometimes all they need is a hand to hold, an ear to listen and a heart to understand them. You can learn a lot about people, the universe and yourself just by listening.

Don't be afraid to agree to disagree. Not everyone has the same thoughts, values or ideas. That doesn't make them wrong, just different than yours.

You will always have people to lift you up and you have the power to help them feel good about themselves in return. You feed off the good, positive thoughts you put out in the universe. So if someone is not nice to you, let them go and walk in this world with people that love you, that put value in your life and share the same thoughts and ideas that you have.

Being kind can make a real difference in someone's life that you might not even know about. A smile to someone walking down a hall might be the only smile they saw that day. Your smile can lift people up, make their day. A smile and a kind word can make someone's day and can be contagious. You smile, they smile, they smile at the next person, and so on ...

Have compassion for other people. You might not know what's going on in their lives. They may be fighting a much harder battle than you could think of. Take a minute to think about what might be going on in their lives; try to put yourself in their shoes. Try not to judge. Everyone is different and that's the way the world turns. Wouldn't it be boring if everyone was the same?!

Respect yourself and others. With other people, give them the respect they deserve and you should get respect in return. If they don't respect you, that's another time to let someone go. Respect means valuing each others' points of view, being open to accepting people as they are. Don't dismiss people because they are different. Also, no gossiping or spreading lies. To lie about someone is never OK. Treat people how you want to be treated! Respect yourself and make good, healthy decisions.
Think before you act. Think--this could have a positive or negative reaction for me in the next 10 minutes or the next 10 years.

Take care of yourself, Body, Mind, and Soul. You are special. You are unique. You are beautiful.

Giving your kindness can be the best gift that people can receive. It is something that they will always remember! Live in kindness, love and truth and it will always come back to you. A life filled with kindness and love is a life to cherish and be proud of.

Mother Teresa said, "Kind words can be short and easy to speak, but their echoes are truly endless."

Be kind. Be happy.

Love Aunt Gena

~Gena Woods
My life began as an adoptee and I was blessed with parents who embraced me with love and made me feel part of the family. At that time my parents lived in Charleston, South Carolina, where they owned a thriving restaurant. But their hearts were in Wisconsin where they lived most of their lives. When I was a baby we all headed back to Wisconsin where they built a new restaurant. We lived in the Italian neighborhood where we shopped, went to church, and where I attended the Catholic school.

At that time when my parents were starting their lives over, money was very tight. Looking back, I realize how poor we were. I recall having only four pieces of clothing hanging in my closet. Thankfully, life improved. When I was ten years old my mother died of cancer. I was surrounded with heartache. I experienced much already.

At age eighteen I met Greg. We married at twenty. I never regretted marrying young, but we both grew up in a hurry. We had two wonderful children, Zach and Shaunna. They fulfilled my life and gave it new meaning. Many more moments of joy continued with my five grandchildren: Athena, Sebastian, Charlie, Sydney, and Ava. I'm still a mother tiger when needed.

Looking back at my life so far, my journey is a journey I have little control over. I just try to make good choices considering all the curves. The journey with family and friends is what I love most.

To all of the young women now and in the future, simply give your love and acceptance. Especially to the children. With that, they will go to bed secure, and hopefully someday leave their world a better place.

~Marie Townsend
I was born in 1978. I grew up in a house with a huge front and back yard. It was awesome--and stable. In reflection, that is the one word that describes my life. Stable.

I followed a very traditional path--almost like the Game of Life. I graduated high school, went to college, got married at 22, and then proceeded to start having children. Motherhood became my unexpected career choice.

I first had Athena, followed by Sebastian, Charlotte and Sydney. Together with my husband Matt, we have lived in the same vicinity our entire lives.

My goal in life is to keep the stability going; However, if my life is a game, I want to end up with the jackpot.

~Shaunna Osburn
I am ten years old. I dye my hair a lot. I love Harry Potter. I am a big reader. I find it very interesting. I have a big library.

I love writing things. It is super fun. I write in notebooks, some books, and drawing paper. I am really good at school. I get really good grades. I am best at science. My least favorite is math.

I love tennis shoes. They are so comfy. I love love love cheerleading. I'm really loud. I took gymnastics for eight years. I'm really flexible.

I'm a huge rabbit person. I have two rabbits myself. I also have a dog. We used to have a turtle named Bob. We set him free.

People call me a great person. I'm very shy. Some days I am very crazy.

~Athena Osburn
Charlotte Osburn--a.k.a. Charlie--is a five year old twin.

She loves superheros and roller coasters. Her favorite activity in the world is drawing pictures. Her goal in life is to record every emotion and experience on paper.
Sydney is Charlie's twin.

Sydney loves superheroes. She has a passion for the color pink. Sydney's goal in life is to marry a handsome prince. She believes everyone should be kind and assumes that is already the case. She has exceptional manners.
Lalaloopsy, Barbie, and school are what is important.

~Ava Townsend
Punkin' Belly,

Many of the incredible women in your life have given you wonderful advice about following your dreams, finding your passion, being kind and true to yourself.

I'm going to lay some practical, dry, boring good old fashioned mom words of wisdom on you: Always have a backup plan. You have to work hard for what you want, the world won't, and shouldn't, hand you anything you haven't earned, and until you've reached your goal, you have to have a plan B.

Maybe that seems harsh. Maybe a mom is supposed to encourage her daughter to find her passion and never settle for anything less than that. I think I'm just too logical and practical to encourage you to go blindly forth pursuing what you love. I want you to be safe, to have resources, to be able to support yourself comfortably, even if that means not living the dream job. But my practical, logical advice comes from my love for you.

And oh, man. I love you. You are brilliant and funny and kind. You are so kind. You are beautiful and talented. You have such a good soul. And I am so very proud of you. I love your tenacity and individuality. You are becoming the most wonderful young woman, and I know you'll do amazing things. Even with a less than exciting day job.

But you have a super power too. You have a way of making just about anything fun. Your sense of humor is one of my favorite things about you. You can always make me laugh.

All I really want for you is happiness. I hope that you know how much I love you. And I hope that you will always remember that I have always done my very best, even though sometimes my best was sadly lacking. I may not be the best mother in the history of the world, but I am the best mother I know how to be, and I hope that that means that I am the best mother in the world for you.

Be good, and have fun.

~momma