

Blue Like Play Dough



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

TRICIA GOYER
FOREWORD BY JOANNA WEAVER

Praise for
Blue Like Play Dough

“I couldn’t put *Blue Like Play Dough* down. Tricia’s love of God comes through on every page as she shows what motherhood is like when God wields His rolling pin and smoothes the rough edges of her life. Before you know it, your heart will be putty in God’s hands, too.”

—GINGER KOLBABA, editor, *Today’s Christian Woman*

“With fresh, disarming honesty, Tricia Goyer gives us a glimpse into the challenges of motherhood and womanhood as we know it oh-so-well. She then gently nudges us to remain pliable in the hands of the One who is deliberate in His plans for us. A surrendered life is a beautiful life. Thanks, Tricia, for giving us an authentic picture of what that sort of life looks like.”

—ROBIN JONES GUNN, best-selling author of the Christy Miller series and the Sisterchicks series

“A hopeful book that moms will relish, *Blue Like Play Dough* is an honest, peel-back-the-covers look at the creative way God shapes us through childhood and parenthood. Tricia Goyer explores her own weaknesses along the journey, revealing her desire to serve the God who forms strength and joy and perseverance within her. A compelling, fresh read.”

—Mary E. DeMuth, author of *Authentic Parenting in a Postmodern Culture*

“I didn’t even know I needed to read this book until I found myself weeping as Tricia’s story reached right into my mothering heart. Part memoir and part self-help, *Blue Like Play Dough* is a must read for every mother who has ever doubted her purpose. An

honest, hopeful read that will hearten moms no matter what stage of motherhood they are in.”

—TINA ANN FORKNER, author of *Ruby Among Us* and *Rose House*

“Tricia’s story reveals a great truth: that as God uses us to grow our kids, He grows us in the process too.”

—MARY BYERS, author of *Making Work at Home Work* and *The Mother Load*

“The best hostesses make you feel welcome in their home, a part of the family. Likewise, the best authors make you feel welcome as you visit them in the pages of their books. Tricia Goyer does that in *Blue Like Play Dough* as she invites you to come into her life and hang out with her family, and she doesn’t apologize for the messiness of family life. Instead, with refreshing vulnerability and transparency, she shows us all that it’s okay to be imperfect in the hands of a God whose love for His own is perfect.”

—NANCY KENNEDY, author of *Girl on a Swing* and *Lipstick Grace*

“Tricia’s book is a masterpiece on motherhood—sculpted by her hands—shaped by her love for God.”

—MARGARET MCSWEENEY, author of *Pearl Girls: Encountering Grit, Experiencing Grace*

“*Blue Like Play Dough* had me nodding, laughing, crying, dog-eared favorite pages, and saying, ‘Wow, I’m not the only mom who feels that way? I’m not weird?’ Honest, gut-wrenching, and funny—this is the kind of book every mom needs to read and keep on her shelf—like a longtime friend—there to walk beside you, drink coffee with you, encourage you. Loved this book!”

—KIMBERLEY WOODHOUSE, author of *Welcome Home: Our Family’s Journey to Extreme Joy*

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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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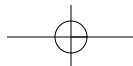
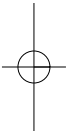
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To John

*My life partner and true love. Thank you for walking with
me as I'm squished and stretched...and for letting me write
about the mess of it!*



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Foreword

As much as I care about having a Mary Heart in a Martha World, I'm coming to realize that another important adventure begins for women when we choose to have a Play Dough Heart in a Lego World! Something wonderful happens when we choose to surrender our ideas of how things must be and instead allow God to shape us. Then the Holy Spirit can take our willingness and make something infinitely more beautiful than all our carefully constructed plans could have ever accomplished.

This book and Tricia Goyer's life are proof of that.

I'll never forget the day I first met Tricia. As a beginning writer, I was excited to meet someone further down the road than I, not to mention one who had let me know she was willing to help me on my journey. At her home, we laughed as we chattered over a cup of tea about the ins and outs of publishing. But I have to confess I felt a little intimidated. Tricia's house was in pristine order, her kids well behaved, her office an organizer's dream. In short, she appeared to be everything I was not. The fact she was ten years younger didn't help. But Tricia's sweet authenticity and genuine acceptance overcame my insecurities. One cup of tea and we became fast friends.

Foreword

As impressed as I was with the twenty-something Tricia I met fourteen years ago, I can honestly say my admiration for her has only grown. Oh, her house isn't nearly as clean now, and her office...well, let's just say the piles of research and books do my little heart good. But the beauty of my friend's life now is absolutely breathtaking! Rather than focusing on shaping a perfectly ordered life, she has chosen to be moldable clay in God's hands. Tricia is still everything she was, but she has become so much more.

I'm privileged to recommend *Blue Like Play Dough* for your personal reading. You will be both charmed and challenged by Tricia's wonderful book. I've laughed and cried through its pages. Most of all, I've experienced a renewed desire to surrender all that I am into my Father's trustworthy hands. After all, He has a much better idea of what He "had in mind when He made the original me," as Charlie Shedd wrote.

Though we may all tremble a bit at the thought, I pray we each come to that sweet point of surrender. For us it will be an incredibly freeing and transforming act of becoming...play dough in God's hands.

—JOANNA WEAVER, author of *Having a Mary Heart in a Martha World* and *Having a Mary Spirit*

Prologue

Before 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

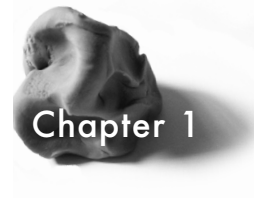
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was following a pattern. He had something in mind. God, the artist, was shaping me, forming me to represent an image of His Son.

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,

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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.

In the Middle of My Mess

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.

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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 as if 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...

In the Middle of My Mess

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

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goes 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 for 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—

In the Middle of My Mess

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.



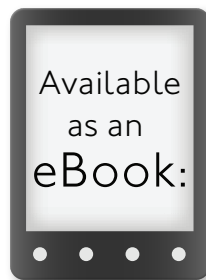
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