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Fired from Carpool

Cristie Cowles Charles

I don't think this is working out."
"What do you mean? What part isn't working out?"

"I just feel like we have different styles. I mean, I miss my kids so much while they're at school that I want to see them as soon as possible afterward. And you seem to have . . . different priorities." My neighbor Julie's¹ blown-out blonde hair shakes at that last word, and she shifts in her doorway.

"So wait, what are you saying? Are you . . . firing me?" Besides the extreme embarrassment burning my cheeks and hot tears that I'm trying to hide behind my shaggy bangs, a small panic erupts in my gut. *How will I possibly make it on time across town twice a day?* Oh. I start to see her point.

"I just think we should take a break and see how it goes." She moves to close her front door but pauses and opens it again, revealing a stunning photo wall of her three kids behind her. "I don't understand how you can't be there waiting at 3:20 to pick them up. Don't you teach a class every day at BYU? You have to be on time for that, right?"

"Well, that's Tuesday and Thursday in the middle of the day," I answer. What I don't mention is that I have a series of five alarms in increasing decibels and frequency to get me out of my office door. And I'm still often behind, running down the hallway to collect my colored-paper copies, springing down steps to forgo elevators' sluggish apathy, and rushing through far-off basement classroom doors out of breath. I've started buying shoes based on how well they stay on my feet in a sprint, which is

1. All names have been changed.

hard to test in a store, so now I order online and run laps in my basement. Sometimes I forget to mail back the rejects. I'm starting to sense a pattern.

"It's true that I should do better—*will* do better" I try, in an attempt to appeal to Julie's sense of mercy, but this time her statuesque features match her immovable will. I surrender and turn to walk down her porch steps as a familiar mom-guilt bubbles up inside me. It's not that I don't love my kids—when we're together, we have more fun and get along better than anyone I know—I'm just really bad at the daily stuff: the waking, the cooking, the cleaning, the driving. I have to admit that in an attempt to send one last email or meet with one more student, I sometimes snoozed my leave-to-pick-up-the-kids alarm a little too long. Somehow, I'd subconsciously thought that children would be more forgiving. I hadn't counted on their mothers.

What I also didn't mention to Julie is that earlier today one of my best friends from Boston, Abigail, confided in me that she was diagnosed with adult ADHD, and I'd been mulling that over ever since. Abigail is no ordinary woman. She's highly accomplished, was top of her class at Wellesley, worked as a corporate lawyer before quitting to advocate full time for her autistic child, and was the most intimidating Gospel Doctrine teacher the Cambridge (Massachusetts) 1st Ward had ever seen. However, I would often notice her sneaking into the back of the chapel during sacrament meeting, consistently ten to fifteen minutes late. I noticed this because I was often the one opening the door for her as we snuck in at the same time.

Abigail's ADHD diagnosis felt inconceivable. "But you're so accomplished," I'd said. "That doesn't make sense."

"I think I was in denial for years," she'd replied. "It turns out many 'high-functioning' adults, especially women, don't realize they have ADHD—they just think they're bad at everyday tasks."

Whoa. That phrase "everyday tasks" echoed in my head until I'd had to get off the phone as fast as possible, trying to throw a little empathy Abigail's way before I'd said goodbye. Now, as I return home from being carpool-fired, all I can think about is how much Abigail's troubles feel like my own.

I sit at my bedroom desk, move piles of papers, unstick half a dozen Post-it notes from the keyboard, and google *adult ADHD* to find the Mayo Clinic list of symptoms.² I check off the first three in rapid succession:

2. Mayo Foundation for Medical Education and Research, "Adult Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)," *Mayo Clinic*, June 22, 2019, <https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/adult-adhd/symptoms-causes/syc-20350878>.

- poor planning. Check.
- trouble multitasking. Check.
- problems following through and completing tasks. Check.

I think of my friend Carrie, who used to call herself “The Closer” because she was so driven to finish tasks. Me, she called “The Opener.”

- excessive activity or restlessness. Check.

Does “trying to do too much” count as excessive activity? Is that really *excessive*? Isn’t that just being *ambitious*?

- trouble coping with stress. Check.
- disorganization and problems prioritizing. Check.

Prioritizing. There’s that word again. I silently curse Julie for pin-pointing my failings better than I did. But now I’m getting distracted.

- problems focusing on a task. Check.

Great. And now the fact that I’m crying about this is a marker, too:

- frequent mood swings. Check.

Oh. And the kicker:

- poor time management skills. Double check.

As I scroll, I learn that another name for poor time management skills is time blindness. It sounds like a disease, but it describes me perfectly: the inability to estimate how much time has gone by, how long a task will take, or how much more time you’ll need for extra things such as walking to your parking spot or making lunch before you leave.³ Me to a T. I add my own item to the list:

- extreme optimism that “just driving faster and smarter” will make up for minutes lost elsewhere. Check.

I realize Abigail also prides herself in her fast Boston-style driving. It occurs to me that this ADHD thing might not necessarily be a joke.

The website says symptoms can usually be traced back to childhood, and I wonder how long I’ve been like this without putting the pieces together. Memories from my past start bubbling up like the gnocchi I should be starting for dinner. I pull out my box of old journals and start

3. Bridget Read, “What Is ‘Time Blindness’ and Do You Have It?” *The Cut*, April 10, 2020, <https://www.thecut.com/2020/04/coronavirus-self-isolation-time-blindness.html>.

rifling through them. If I'm being honest, I've always had trouble with follow-through. As an eight-year-old, I may have been able to do perfect cartwheels between the grocery store shelves filled with glass pickle jars, but balancing the rest of life hadn't been nearly as effortless. I remember returning piles upon piles of only half-read library books with a side of guilt. And most of my sporadic journal entries stopped *in medias res*.

Then there was the time I spent weeks writing a fabulous patriotic speech for a local Fourth of July contest but didn't leave enough time to memorize more than the first thirty seconds. I got as far as the check-in desk before realizing that there was no mercy on the memorization bit. I turned around in my dress and church shoes and simply walked out to the hum of other kids in line rehearsing their memorized pages. The theme song of my childhood could have been sung by Elvis: "So Close Yet So Far."

Sighing and glancing back up to the computer, I see another familiar symptom:

- Hot temper. Check.

I'm reminded that my high school friends nicknamed me "Crusty" because of all the angry, crusty glares I gave. Ouch.

I realize even my carpool troubles have an origin story: I can't believe I was never tipped off by the fact that every day in high school I made the mom across the street wait with everyone squished into the back of their running sedan—including my little sister—while I still hurried to finish throwing on my grunge-flannel shirt and ripped jeans ten minutes late. They would leave the front seat open so I could jump in as fast as possible, then the mom peeled down the road and wrote us all "late passes" to give to the still-beehived-in-the-'90s Attendance Lady. I'm honestly surprised I didn't get fired from carpool back then.

Although now that I think about it, the first time I *was* fired was in high school. This time it was my piano teacher. One would think as the consumer, I—or at least my mom—would get to do the firing. But instead I received a formal, typed-out letter in the mail claiming a desire to "slim down my piano studio and focus on teaching younger students." She didn't mention the frequent tears at my lessons that I always tried to hide with my bangs or my rhythmically inconsistent scales—impossible to pull off correctly without steady, daily practice. She also didn't mention that mine was the only letter she sent out.

I've since noticed that the people who end up majoring in piano performance are the ones who have a penchant for obedience and consistency. My neighbor Julie's a great pianist; she plays with measured certainty. I, on the other hand, play with passion, "dripping with emotion"

as my mom used to say. However, I'm embarrassed by my lack of accuracy. I crave the technical perfection that can only be won through daily diligence, but I've never been able to sit long enough for the extra hours necessary. In fact, on the days in high school when I did practice, I spent most of my time sampling from the dozens of piano books on my mom's bookshelf because sight-reading felt more fun than playing what was assigned. There *was* one good side to my distracted piano ways, though: now I'm an excellent sight reader. Consistency can get you good technique, but distraction makes you good-in-a-pinch and flexible.

I'm surprised to see in my journal that once at a summer music camp I actually won an award: a masterclass with the university's best professor. They told me to bring a "working piece," something I was still learning so he could give me feedback on it. But I was intimidated at the thought of my imperfections being laid out that obviously, so I decided to play my best piece, the one I'd just played in the piano competition, to impress him by not making any mistakes. The other students in the masterclass played half-finished songs and received many expert tips for achieving rhythmic precision or practicing tricky passages, but when this teacher got to my piece, he had little to say. I remember he helped me think through some of my interpretations of the song, playing a little more *giocoso*, but after a few minutes he moved on to the next student. Instead of being proud, I realized I had missed an opportunity to actually improve.

I leaf through my journals and wonder how many other times I'd missed opportunities to learn because I wanted to hide my flaws. I come across an entry about one particular winter Sunday during our time in graduate school when I was just setting out to walk down the icy, skyscrapered wind tunnel that was our walk to church. Even though I'd woken up plenty early, I hadn't been able to find anything to wear that wasn't totally out of style or didn't make me look fat, and I was having a seriously bad hair day. By the time I saw the rented former boiler building where the rest of my family was already sitting in sacrament meeting, church had been going for thirty minutes.

As I walked, I thought about how we'd been living in expensive Boston for six years and had no immediate hope for an end to my husband's PhD, let alone job prospects, and I'd recently given birth to our third child, whom we had to somehow fit into our already-bursting-at-the-seams twenty-fourth-floor apartment. Plus, the idea of opening the back door to the chapel yet again with all the heads turning to look at me felt like just another reminder of my utter weakness. I was tired and grumpy and not in the mood to see a bunch of perfect people at church having good hair days and who had yet again managed to get themselves there on time. Particularly irksome

were all those gorgeously coiffed, rich business school students who parked their bright red sports cars next to our rusty, dented non-power-locks-or-windows beater in the dorm parking garage. Oh, how I envied their key fobs, their talk of “stock portfolios,” and their high-end fashion!

I thought hard that day about turning around and just going home; it seemed pretty justifiable in my mind. Then no one would notice I wasn't there—they'd probably assume I was home sick or out of town, and I could still pretend I wasn't just a work in progress. I finally said a prayer, “Heavenly Father, I'm going to show up, but that's all I can give today. I don't have it in me to make thoughtful comments or go out of my way to make friends with a new sister in Relief Society or volunteer to have the missionaries over. Today all I can do is show up.” And with that, something kept me moving.

As I turned into the walled church courtyard and opened the old industrial door, the scripture story of the poor widow came into my mind—the one where she walks through all the rich worshippers to put in her two mites. That day I felt very much like that widow walking in her obvious weakness with little to give. I liked to think that the widow was a young mom like me, far from perfect, that she'd left a less-than-tidy house that day, that maybe she'd carried a child on her hip to the temple, hurrying because she was late, and that she might have even had some unkind thoughts about the rich people she'd had to walk through to get to the treasury box. But there was at least something that kept her moving.

Maybe she recognized that what she needed more than those two mites was proximity to God. And that the way to find him was to be in holy places giving what she could despite her obvious shortcomings. It's easy to give when you have abundance, on days when you have energy and excitement and good hair, but the test comes on those days when you're embarrassingly late, your shoes are wet from tromping through the snow, and your well-coiffed ward is glaring at your interruption.

I'd like to say that after I got to church that day something profound happened, but that's not always how lessons work. I don't remember the rest of that particular day. What I do remember is that I kept going, and soon after, I was called as the Primary pianist—a calling that was easy for me because, you know, I'm flexible and a good sight reader. And I ended up having a great time Doing as They Were Doing, Following the Prophet around the room, and racing the kids as they Head, Shouldered, Kneel, and Toed.

One Sunday as I was kneeling to put my songbook in my bag, I felt a triple tap on my shoulder. I turned and stood to see the tiniest three-year-old Sunbeam, Sara Lopez. She grabbed my hand and put a red folded-and-glued construction paper card in it.

“Teacher, teacher. I made this for you in my class.”

I opened it to find a picture of a stick-figure woman with long brown hair holding hands with a girl with short black hair and a pink triangle skirt standing next to a big brown box.

“That’s you and that’s me and that’s a piano.”

Arched over the figures it said “tHAnk yOu tEAcHEr i LoVE u.” She gave my legs a quick hug and ran off to her family. And as I stood there next to the brick wall of the Primary room, something inside me healed.

That little girl didn’t care if I’d been late to church for the umpteenth time or that I felt self-conscious about my leftover baby weight. She’d accepted my meager offering as is, and for a brief moment her view of me felt like a window into God’s.

Now, staring at the ADHD symptom list on my dusty monitor, I wonder if God can help me with these tendencies that have apparently always accompanied me along my way.

I think of Enoch and Moses, who were “slow of speech,” and the overlooked servant Abish and an uneducated fourteen-year-old boy prophet. I wonder if God can make something of me too. I know we focus a lot on the scripture Ether 12:27 that God “will make weak things become strong,” but I like verse 37 better: “because thou hast seen thy weakness, thou shalt be made strong.” I’m realizing that in facing my whole self—warts and all—I can begin to give an offering that could open the windows of heaven. So I decide to try, like the widow, to give God “all my living.”

Yes, I think, *but where do I begin when I’m already failing? I haven’t even earned a D– in carpool.* Yet at that thought, my mind is drawn to the family of my newly called bishop, whose kids also attend the same across-town French-immersion school as mine. It occurs to me that by offering to start a carpool with them—with full disclosure of my past failings—I could be a blessing to *them* and take some of their daily burden. And I get along well with Andrea, the bishop’s wife, who’s much more chill about timing than my neighbor Julie, so there’s a real chance for carpool redemption. Maybe this day of embarrassment and failure is the beginning of a miracle: the carpool relationship I was meant to have all along. And that feels like enough to keep me moving.

I fight the urge to put this off and pick up the phone.

“Hi, Andrea, I was just thinking about how our kids go to the same school and was wondering if you want to try a carpool. I need to tell you that I have a tendency to show up a little late sometimes, but it’s something I’m working on . . .”

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