

Lessons from a juggler

“I’m not coming to the circus,” I tell Patrick over the phone, referring to the Kelly Miller Circus being held on our farm that night.

It had been the worst day I’d had in a long time, and I certainly didn’t need to add more drama to my life. Frank had to be evaluated for his speech delay first thing in the morning. Then there were swim lessons and a host of other tasks to be completed in Bel Air, where my parents live. Even though they weren’t home, we decided to use their house as a layover space between appointments.

As I was putting Collin’s wet bathing suit into the washer, Frank threw a Yankee Candle into the toilet. Collin simultaneously spilled a box of tiny pasta all over the floor. Somehow a chocolate granola bar melted to the back of Leo’s neck while he was in his car seat. The boys were covered in food, diapers needed to be changed, and we were already running late for Frank’s hearing test.

Of course, Collin tried to talk the audiologist’s ear off while she was evaluating Frank. Then Leo started crying. And Frank, being Frank, refused to sit still. Even the audiologist looked like she was about to scream.

That’s when I told Patrick I wasn’t going to the circus. We went home, instead of going back to my parents’ house. After some bubbles and ball play in the yard, we had reset. We were ready to stop by Collin’s camp orientation and head to the circus, after all.

From the second we entered the tent, Frank wailed. (He doesn’t like the dark.) So, I held him outside the tent doors and we watched from there. It was peaceful, a cool early summer evening, the smell of cotton candy and popcorn filling the air. I tried several times to bring him into the tent. He almost always cried, until the last time when an Ethiopian man bounced into the ring, dropping rubber balls into a sideways drum, dribbling six without dropping one. He put on a few more dizzying juggling displays, and was on a roll until he dropped one. His face and his posture dropped.

An assistant brought out a 10 foot ladder and held on to the balls - seven of them. As the man tried to steady the ladder, it wobbled. But, seeming rushed, he moved to the next step and tried harder to balance than he had before. The outcome was even worse. By the time he got to the top, the ladder was as jittery and unstable as a Model T missing a tire. The assistant tossed him the balls. As soon as he bounced the first one, the rest of the balls went flying, with the ladder and juggler crashing down behind them.



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The juggler looked as though he was melting under the lights, crumbling under the ash in front of a thousand sets of eyes, but he shrugged and forced a smile.

“Would you like to see him try again?” the announcer asked.

The crowd roared and the juggler consented. This time, he waited until the ladder was steady before moving to the next step. He double checked his footing before asking the assistant for the balls. He kept his focus on each of the seven balls as he juggled them from the ground to his rapidly moving hands, 10 feet above. He didn't have to think about his balance because it was already there. When the act was finished, he descended gracefully and bowed gratefully.

I cheered louder than anyone, for he had taught me a valuable lesson. I can juggle anything, but only if I have a sturdy foundation and a sense of balance. My day was a lot like his:

- Just like the juggler starting up the ladder after a disappointing failure, I started out the day negatively, imagining how stressed out I would be rather than picturing myself accomplishing each task.

- That day, I was hastily climbing the ladder, checking off my to-do list, dragging the boys with me like how the juggler skipped to the next wrung before mastering the first.

- Like the juggler, I tried to force a weak foundation to work at the peak of my stress.

- “I'm not coming to the circus,” was me crashing.

- I nearly gave up when we returned home, but I took the opportunity to “reset,” just as the juggler did before he began his second climb.

- When I decided to go to the circus after all, I changed my attitude, which enabled me to handle Frank's distress and appreciate the circus, particularly the juggler. I needed no applause, but he deserved his.