



Fall 2010



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Grand Designs: Navigating the Amazing Trails of Motherhood

by Nicola Burnell



Bright Angel Canyon, Arizona. Photograph by Nicola Burnell

Ten years ago, I published an article titled *Oh Boy!* in *Cape Women* magazine. After being raised in a family of strong, opinionated women, I was examining the challenges of raising boys when I had so little experience with the male population.

My article concluded that if I listened to my sons, I mean REALLY LISTENED to who they are and what they needed as they matured, I would be guided along the unfamiliar path of motherhood. I am happy to report that my insight was correct and now, a decade later, my sons are becoming the young men I always hoped they could be.

Thanks to my mother, my sisters and I found our voices at a very young age and were encouraged to use them, loudly, when necessary. She also encouraged us to be independent, self-reliant and courageous.

I believe I was twelve when the headmistress of our all-girls' Catholic secondary school declared that "Good Catholic girls belong at home."

It was my mother who showed me how to change draconian rules. She marched into that spinster's office and demanded that her daughters be allowed to sit the exams that would open the doors to higher education.

When my time came to leave the nest I couldn't fly off fast enough. I took a plane from Heathrow airport to JFK just three days after graduating from University and the rest, as they say, is history.

Now it's my turn to let go and see how far the wings of my own children can take them.

I say children, I still call them that, but they are young men now. And what courageous young men they are! I know I'm biased, but I made it my personal mission to raise my sons the same way my mother raised me – to find their voices at a young age and to follow their hearts to wherever their dreams may take them.

My eldest son is an artist who has his sights set on Massachusetts College of Art and Design. My younger son is a musician with plans to attend Berklee.

It has been my job, as their mother, to nurture these creative aspirations and trust that if they follow their passions they will succeed at whatever they do.

I have Julia Cameron to thank for my confidence that art and music are serious career choices. Passages from her book *The Artist's Way* have been echoing through my head for years.

Years ago, I promised my sons that we would see the Grand Canyon before they graduated high school. It was one of those "some day" ideas that often got lost among the endless "To Do" lists of daily life. Being a single mother, I didn't relish the thought of attempting this trip as the only adult, so I let the trip keep falling to the bottom of the list.

This past summer, my sons and I found ourselves peering over the cliff edges of Bright Angel Point, on the North Rim of the Grand Canyon, into a fathomless, mysterious, ancient chasm below. Two of my sisters stood beside me. The Grand Canyon had been on their wish lists too.

Although we couldn't see it, we all knew the Colorado River was still carving its course through layers of multicolored rock that held historic details dating back over two billion years. The size, age and beauty of the canyon were breathtaking, and not just because we were struggling to breathe the extremely thin air.



Steven Francis-Burnell listens to the voices of the Grand Canyon

The paved narrow trail that followed a steep ridge to the Bright Angel lookout point was not for the faint-of-heart, rising 8,148 feet above sea level. I tried not to acknowledge my peripheral vision as I walked forward, keeping my eyes firmly on the ground, just inches before my feet.

But my sons fooled around, as boys do, leaving the trail to climb boulders that were precariously balanced on one side of the narrow paths stretching out into the canyon's gaping abyss. I had heart attacks, as mothers do, when I imagined them hurtling to their deaths.

The only way to express my sense of terror that they could die if they lost their balance, was to leave the safety of the path and threaten to climb onto one of the protruding boulders myself.

It was my eldest son who caught both my arms and begged me not to risk my life. Relieved, I returned to the trail and said, "Now you know how I feel," as I marched passed him.

The Grand Canyon surprised me. The silence that floated in the air above us was louder than anything I've ever heard before. It told me to stop. To sit. To look and to listen.

It reminded me that life is a journey through many wonderful, treacherous, exciting moments, and that each second that passes is something to be felt as deeply as possible.

It asked me stop white-knuckle driving to work, to school, to appointments. It suggested that I slow down enough to smell the lavender growing in pots on my deck. It asked me to listen to the laughter of my sons playing x-box with their friends in their basement man-cave.

I hated the panic in my chest at the thought of losing my sons on that trail. But I loved the warmth of the knowledge that I got us there, to that incredible place, just as I'd promised.

I hate the thought of entering this final year of living with my eldest son before he flies the coop, but I love the strength of his commitment to his own future.



Sebastian Francis-Burnell steps onto his own Amazing Trail

I can't help the mental countdown that began with "This is our last summer as a family all living together" and will no doubt continue through every Holiday and birthday for the next twelve months.

I know this is what we mothers do and I accept that within three years, both my sons will be navigating their own journeys through lives that will no longer be lived within the safety of my arm's reach. And I love the knowledge that I helped them find their voice, their vision, their passions, just as my mother helped me to find mine.

I understand now that Nature makes teenagers challenging to live with so that we want to help them pack, to drive them to their new lives, to wave them goodbye, and then to trust that they will, despite all the fears a mother can imagine, be okay.



Sisters – Karen, Nicola and Jaqueline

As I stood looking into the heart of the Grand Canyon, where so much was said in such deafening silence, my sisters stood beside me, assuring me that as our lives unfold before us, we will always have each other to share our journeys.



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