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+

FREE

FAMILY



FORGING YOUR OWN PATH TO A LIFE FULL
OF WONDER, ADVENTURE, AND CONNECTION

AINSLEY ARMENT

FOUNDER OF WILD + FREE





THE WILD + FREE FAMILY

*Forging Your Own Path to
a Life Full of Wonder,
Adventure, and Connection*

AINSLEY ARMENT



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*To Ben—
sun to my moon
filling me
with light
illuminating me
with love*

*To Wyatt, Dylan, Cody, Annie, and Millie—
the brightest stars
teaching me
forever
leading me
to wonder*

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Introduction

YOUR FAMILY WAS MADE FOR MORE

In the spring of 2009, my husband Ben and I were at a crossroads. We had moved to Atlanta, Georgia, for a job opportunity and were enjoying a comfortable life. We had two little boys at the time and another on the way. We lived in a cookie-cutter house with two cars in the driveway and an opportunity to purchase a new home that summer.

Our son Wyatt was in a four-day-a-week prekindergarten, and I took our three-year-old, Dylan, to the gym each morning, where he played in the childcare center while I worked out.

I was building a small nutrition business in my spare time and running a blog for mothers called *Chattahoochee Mama*, a tongue-in-cheek nod to the famous river that ran near our house.

I was content. Ben was content. My children were happy. And our home was peaceful.

But our family was missing the one thing that would make each day feel like something more than going through the motions: a greater purpose for our lives together.

We spent those warm Georgia evenings at the park, where our boys played while Ben and I tried to decide whether to

double-down on the job, purchase a home here, and settle for life in suburbia.

We wrestled with the decision. Staying put would mean surrendering our dreams on the altar of security. But walking away would mean giving up everything we had ever worked for: a good job, a nice house, and a sense of financial security for the first time in our lives.

In the meantime, I went through the motions of taking Wyatt to school each morning. I remember sitting in the drop-off carpool line with my numbered security card on the back of the sun visor so they could identify him.

As I approached the drop-off point, a teacher would fling open the van door, scoop Wyatt out of his car seat like a parachutist going out the back of a C-17, and yell “Go, go, go!” while I frantically blew him a kiss, tossed out a sack lunch, and kept the van rolling to avoid holding up the line.

At the time, I was driving an old minivan that was not equipped with automatic doors like most everyone else’s newer models. The teacher would invariably leave the door open, thinking I would push the button to close it, only to leave me with no choice but to drive away with the door wide open, no matter the weather. I would pull over on the side of a busy, two-lane road, get out, walk around the side of the van, and close it with a big heave-ho.

It would have been funny if it hadn’t happened every single day.

It’s not that we didn’t have beauty and blessings in our lives, making memories and marking the milestones with gratitude. But in many ways, it felt like our life was being lived for us.

We were like the Jetsons cartoon family, who get scooped out of their beds by conveyer belts each morning and transported to the bathroom for a shower, to the closet to get dressed, and to the kitchen to eat breakfast before being taken

to work in flying cars. Only our conveyor belt was the school schedule, the work routine, the gym membership, and the daily grind.

Unless we did something about it, nothing would ever change. This routine would become our life until death do us part.

One day at work, Ben got called into a meeting with the other directors at his company. The company was making cutbacks, and the CEO asked each of them to write down the names of the employees who should be let go first, the low performers. Ben's heart sank. These were the very people he worked with, ate lunch with, and celebrated with.

He said it felt like nominating tributes in *The Hunger Games*.

After the exercise, the CEO dismissed everyone but the top executives. As Ben walked back to his office, passing the very employees whose names had been jotted on the whiteboard, he had a sudden realization: there was nothing stopping the CEO from writing down *his* name after he left the meeting.

The job security that was keeping us from making courageous decisions, following our dreams, going on adventures, and spending more time together as a family was nothing more than an illusion. We realized that we had built our lives around supporting someone else's purpose—the company's purpose, society's purpose, the school system's purpose. But we weren't living *our* purpose.

I don't recommend this to everyone, but we decided to quit that life without any other prospects and move back to Virginia Beach, where we had always dreamed of raising a family, close to the ocean and the ones we loved. We cast off society's conventions to build a life based on what mattered most to us. Time together. Our own schedule. And the freedom to travel the world at will.

It wasn't easy. In fact, it took several years to find our footing. But after a few different endeavors, some successful, some not, we finally found our purpose, which led me to start an Instagram account and later an organization called Wild + Free.

With dozens of events each year, hundreds of thousands of community members, millions of podcast downloads, groups all over the world, and the creation of the Wild + Free Farm Village in the Allegheny Mountains of Virginia, Wild + Free has become a movement of families who share the same heart and are breaking free from society's pressures and building a more authentic life.

The Life We Built Together

My family's move back to my hometown proved to be providential. Our contract on a home purchase fell through without any explanation, and we couldn't understand why the seller wouldn't sign the agreement. But then my mother was diagnosed with a malignant brain tumor, and it all became clear.

We were meant to move into her home to look after her and my brother, who was battling his own chronic illness. Now that she's gone, my mother's home has become our own, and my brother still lives in our care.

It's not the life I thought we would be living. It's not the one we always dreamed about. But it's the life we have, and it has come to impact our family in some pretty profound ways, from the intimate moments we had with my mother before she passed away to being close to the ocean for countless seaside explorations.

It has also taught us some priceless lessons. It's taught us that although it might be easier to outsource care, we develop

strength in character by caring for others—the widows, the orphans, and the unwell. It has given us the chance to show our children what it means to be there for family members at their worst, to lean into hard things instead of running away.

In many ways, it has also helped us stay connected to my mother, even though my two little girls were never able to meet her. She passed away before they were born, and yet the yearning to know her still beats strong in their hearts. When they were much younger, whenever they met an older woman who visited our house, they would ask me, “Is that my grandmother?”

My daughter Annie often asks me about my mother. She loves to hear stories about what she was like as a mom to me, and she always concludes wistfully, “I wish I could meet her.”

Little do they know that each and every day they walk the same halls my mother used to walk. They sleep in the same bedroom where she tucked me into bed each night. And they eat at the kitchen table where my mother served countless meals and stayed up late to drink tea and talk with me after a night out.

They are walking in her footsteps and experiencing her legacy, whether they know it or not.

On the other hand, living this life means forgoing what could have been. A bedroom for each of our kids, instead of stacking them three to a room. A neighborhood with other children who are the same age. Living near our other family members so our children could have grandparents as a regular part of their lives.

It’s tempting to look back and wonder if we should have done things differently. Should we have moved to Colorado when we had the chance? Should we have never left my

hometown so that I could have noticed my mother's symptoms and perhaps gotten her treatment before it was too late? Should we have pursued a different occupation to avoid the pressures that rattled our marriage early on?

Life can feel like a "choose your own adventure" story with feelings of regret and remorse, gratitude and glee, over the choices we've made and the circumstances that have defined us. It would be easy to regret so many decisions gone wrong.

But no, this is the life we built together, and for better or for worse, I will be eternally grateful for it. This is the life we were meant to live. For such a time as this.

My story isn't your story. Our journey isn't your own.

But maybe we aren't so different. Maybe we hope for similar things.

If we don't reimagine what our families can be, we will miss the opportunity to give our children what they need. When we assume that a family has to look a certain way or function according to a specific form, we miss the opportunity to build a meaningful and fulfilling life together.

This practice of life-building feels largely outside our control, but I assure you that it's not. We may not be able to fix the behavior of an absent spouse. We may not be able to change a medical diagnosis, a tragic past, or a decision gone wrong. And we may not be able to fix the problems outside our doors, but we can cultivate a culture that's true to ourselves within our own homes.

My friend Cindy Rollins, the author of *Mere Motherhood*, shared this sentiment about homeschooling, but it could just as easily be said about our family's life together: "It isn't the big plans that are going to make your homeschool. It is the little things you do faithfully year after year that are going to add up to an education and a life for your children."¹

In the absence of doing great things, you can do small things with great love:

The making of meals and folding of laundry.

The reading of books and explaining of algebra.

The planning of lessons and creating of moments.

The making of handcrafts and taking of nature walks.

The searching for lost lovelies and finding of favorite toys.

The games you play and the puzzles you build.

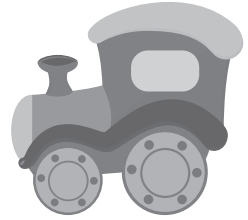
The smile you flash when your child looks up.

The hug you give when your spouse walks by.

The tired prayers you pray.

The grieving tears you cry.

The magic of this life isn't found in the hustle and bustle of constant activity but in the intentional, ordinary decisions of our days.



Keep Fighting for the Light

Your ideal family culture can sometimes feel like an elusive will-o'-the-wisp that you're chasing through the forest, hoping it will lead you to a hidden wonder. Instead, it takes you through sinking sands, blazing deserts, and raging rivers until you're lost, alone, and feeling defeated.

In the end, it feels like folklore. So you give up.

This generation of wild and free families is different, though. I sensed it seven years ago when a group of misfit mamas gathered at the first Wild + Free retreat to connect over common ideals. These were parents longing to connect with their children in a different way. And now, after more than a dozen conferences have brought women to their knees with passionate

tears and a desire to change the future of their families, I can honestly say that this idea of living wild and free is more than a passing fad.

It is a movement that is sweeping through homes and finding its way into the very depths of our souls. It is becoming a part of our DNA, a trait we will pass on to our children and our children's children.

It is awaking a generation to a new way of living—so fiercely and vulnerably that it feels scary and uncertain and oh so real. Yet despite embarking on uncharted territory, not one of us is willing to turn back. We may not know where we're heading, but we are trusting that it's worth it.

If there is one thing that can and will be said of this generation of parents, it is that we did not go gentle into that good night, as the poet Dylan Thomas wrote.²

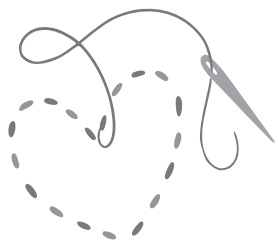
Every day, I see mothers and fathers fighting for the families they desire. I see broken adults committing to raise whole children. I see brave parents doing the hard work of healing from their own childhood trauma and breaking generational cycles. And I witness family after family reclaiming childhood and restoring what has been lost.

If you are in the trenches and wondering if what you are doing is worth it, please know that it is. Keep raging against the dying of the light, my friend.

It's time to find your way back to where you belong. Back to the purpose of your family being knit together. Back to the

passions that stir your soul and the mission to help your children become whole. You are not just breaking cycles for yourself or your children, but for generations to come.

This isn't a book about how to become a better family. It isn't a self-help book on how to



become a proficient parent. And it certainly isn't a book about finding financial freedom or starting a business.

The chapters in front of you offer personal stories from me and other wild and free families, along with research meant to give you permission to cast aside convention and invite you to live a more meaningful, adventurous life.

My good friend Lydia once told me, "It is always better to do hard and important things together. But if no one else is willing, following your calling is still worth doing, even if you have to do it alone."

My intent is to share my story and the many resources, values, and circumstances that have changed our family for the better—the way we live, the way we parent, and the way we love. Your family was made for more, and in each chapter, we'll unpack one aspect of what your family was made *for*, why it matters, and how you might explore living that out in your unique situation.

Whether you travel full-time, homeschool, unschool, or traditionally school your children . . . whether you work for yourself or someone else . . . whether you live in an apartment in the city, in a single-family home in suburbia, or on a homestead on a hill . . . whether you're a single parent, a couple on the rocks, or in a thriving marriage—this is a book about carving your own wild path in the midst of modern culture and, in doing so, finding more love and joy in the way you relate to each other as a family.



My hope is that your family will be inspired to love stronger, live more fully, and grow closer to each other. My prayer is that you will be emboldened to repair relationships and break generational patterns for your children and your children's children. My ultimate desire is that your family will become wild and free.

I am so honored to walk among you, hear your stories, and encourage the incredible, brave work you are doing. Together we will break chains and set souls free.

Let's do this.