

TCW

TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN

APRIL 13, 2016

**STRESSED
AND OVER-
SCHEDULED?**

**LEADING WHEN
YOU'RE NOT IN
CHARGE**

**Passionate,
Called,
Rooted**

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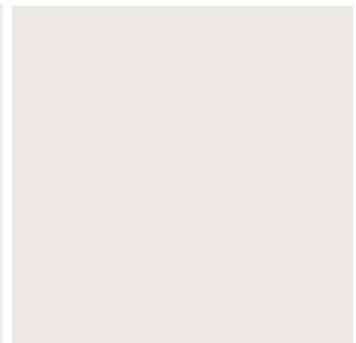
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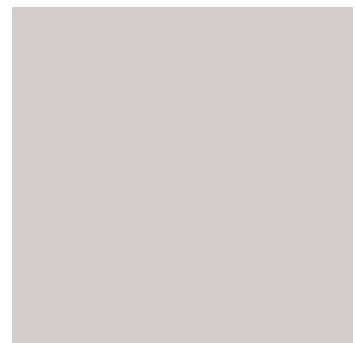
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You Don't Always Need to Change the World



Kelli B. Trujillo, Editor

Integrating faith with your daily work

believe that God made me for a purpose," Eric Liddell says to his sister in his Scottish brogue, "but he also made me fast. And when I run, I feel his pleasure."

That famous scene in *Chariots of Fire*, as Liddell explains his choice to compete in the Olympics before going to China as a missionary, gives us a compelling understanding of *vocation*: using our God-given talents and experiencing God's pleasure as we do.

Frederick Buechner's popular definition of vocation is equally compelling: "The place where God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet."

We were put on earth to make a difference, to change the world, to be used by God for the building of his kingdom! There is, indeed, something inspiring and soul-stirring about the idea that we live out our calling when we discover that unique intersection of God's purposes for his kingdom, the needs of the world, and our own specific combination of talents, abilities, and passions. It's when we cue the *Chariots of Fire* soundtrack, our hearts swell with a sense of purpose, and we feel, *This is what I was made for*.

But sometimes we don't actually feel that way in our work. In fact, sometimes our daily work feels like life-sapping, stress-creating drudgery.

Perhaps for you it's your career. Your job may be tiring and may feel like a mismatch with your gifts and talents. It may seem like it has absolutely nothing to do with your faith or your deepest passions in life.

Or perhaps it's the taxing work of parenting or keeping house. Your daily life intermingles joy with exhaustion and seemingly endless giving.

The truth is that sometimes our daily work is *not* accompanied by an inspirational soundtrack or heart-swelling sense of purpose. And it is then that we experience a sharp dissonance between these moving understandings of vocation and our actual daily reality.

Yet some important voices can speak into this apparent dissonance. Consider how

Dorothy Sayers validated the spiritual importance of one's work: "The worker's first duty is to *serve the work*." **Sayers argued** that a Christian understanding of work meant giving oneself over to it wholeheartedly, doing it with excellence, and engaging with that work as "the medium in which he offers himself to God."

Or consider the idea Margaret Kim Peterson asserts in *Keeping House*: "Housekeeping—cooking, cleaning laundry, all the large and small tasks that go into keeping a household humming along—[is] not a trivial matter but a serious one." Keeping house, she believes, is part of "the properly Christian work of, among other things, meeting the everyday needs of others."

I particularly appreciate this insight from Puritan William Tyndale: "For as touching to please God, there is no work better than another. . . . Now if thou compare deed to deed, there is difference betwixt washing of dishes, and preaching of the word of God; but as touching to please God, none at all." In other words, any work—be it full-time ministry, work in an office or factory, parenting, or keeping house—can be understood **as sacred** when one's heart is aligned with God's.

The conflict we may feel between inspiring understandings of calling and the often less-than-inspiring reality of our daily lives can actually be received as a sort of *harmony* rather than dissonance when we ask two questions simultaneously instead of just one. As I discussed in my book *Embrace Your Worth*, the way we understand calling means asking ourselves *both* the big-picture question, "What is God calling me to do with my life?" and also the critical question, "What is God calling me to do *today*?"

The answer to question number two may not be grand or amazing . . . but that is *just fine*.

As we sort out how our gifts, passions, and talents may align with God's pleasure and with the world's greatest needs, we also live out our discipleship through surrender to and obedience within the daily calling we have. We ask, *How can I do excellent work in my job today? Or How can I embody the fruit of the Spirit in my interactions with my coworkers? Or How can I do the thankless jobs of baby-burping and diaper-changing with good humor and faithfulness today?* Paul affirmed the spiritual importance of this sort of daily work in his advice to the Thessalonian Christians: "Make it your ambition to lead a quiet life: You should mind your own business and work with your hands" (1 Thessalonians 4:11, NIV).

Even if the daily work before us does not seem to align with **our dreams** regarding that first vocational question, we can still answer the second question from a spiritual posture that is rooted in wholehearted love for God (**Ephesians 3:17**). In this issue of *Today's Christian Woman*, you'll find articles to help you tackle these questions, including insights on your **relationships with others**; thoughts on **parenting**, **leadership**, and **busyness**; and reflections on putting Christ at the **center of it all**.

We can live passionately, rooted, and called—not only in those soundtrack, feeling-God's-pleasure, soul's-deep-hunger experiences, but *in every moment*. Why? Because our passion is not only for our work or our tasks—our passion is for Christ himself.

So as you dream and pray and seek out your calling, remember: You don't always have to be changing the world.


In fact, maybe you already *are*.

Grace,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Kelli". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a small dot at the end.

Kelli B. Trujillo

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● Cover Story

Loving Like Jesus

A report card on what I've learned | **BOB GOFF, WITH NATALIE LEDERHOUSE**

I've learned a couple things so far in my life with Jesus. I've learned that Jesus pursues me in love, that he uses circumstances to shape me—even that he talks with me regularly (whether I'm listening or not!).

These lessons—and many more—have greatly impacted my spiritual life, and they have greatly affected the way I treat those around me. Ultimately, I've learned that my actions reveal a lot about what I believe about love.

A REPORT CARD

I'm not a very argumentative guy (even though I'm a lawyer and win arguments for a living), so if you can't get along with me, you can't get along with anybody. But every once in a while there will be somebody who is a little testy who wants to engage me, and I have to think to myself, *This is a report card of what I've learned about love.* I may disagree with their approach and their attitude. I may even disagree with their opinions completely. But I can choose to treat them with love and respect. Most folks may be known for their opinions, but I want to be *remembered* for my love. So when I interact with people who aren't like me, I keep saying to myself over and over again, *What do I want to be remembered for?*

In [Luke 14](#), Jesus essentially asked, "What's the benefit to having a dinner and inviting all these people who can do swell things for you? Go find people who can't do anything for you." What does this mean? For me, it means loving people who aren't like me, whose life

experiences aren't like mine, whose understanding isn't like mine. It means just finding them and being with them. Don't have a debate or an argument with them. Get to know the name of their first puppy. What if we did what it takes to have authentic *care* for others and love them extravagantly?

If you love people the way that Jesus does—and I'm not there yet, but I'm aiming for it—it means being willing to live a life of constant interruptions. What if we quit being efficient in the way that we love people and instead chose to be *present* in the way that we love them?

QUITTING TO MAKE ROOM FOR LOVE

One of the things we'll do if we want to love like Jesus is not just be in the presence of someone but actually be present *with* them. There is a big difference between geography—our physical location—and our full attention.

Jesus was a really busy guy, but he had time for everybody. The woman who **pulled on his shirt**, the **guy in the sycamore tree**—over and over as you're reading the Gospels you'll see these spur-of-the-moment encounters Jesus had with people. We see him living out the whole idea of *Immanuel*: "God with us." Are we truly available to love and be present with others like Jesus was?

Unfortunately, when we overcommit our time and focus too much on *stuff*, our lives turn into the TV show *Hoarders*. We get so much stuff in our lives that we just can't navigate it anymore. And when we're busy maintaining all the stuff we have, it holds us back from becoming the new creation that Jesus spent so much time talking about.

To combat this, a few years ago I started "quitting" things once a week every Thursday. In my book, *Love Does*, I wrote about having gotten rid of a car after it was stolen. I didn't replace it; I bought a skateboard instead. With choices like that, I'm not trying to make my life more convenient; I'm trying to make it more *purposeful*. It's not that convenience is bad—that's not our enemy. But, in my experience, convenience often ends up getting in the way of being a new creation.

Another thing I quit doing years ago was giving advice. For people in our faith communities, what if instead of trying to help others by giving them advice we helped them simply by loving them? Sometimes the way we love a person isn't to give them advice; it's actually to simply *care* about them.

There is something so strong about understanding what somebody might be going through and then *not* trying to relate to it by saying, "Oh, I know how you feel." Because most of the time we don't! Instead, when somebody calls me with something that's going on in their life I say, "Man, that has never happened to me before. What are some of the things you're learning about that?" There is a beautiful respect that comes with that, kind of like taking off your shoes before you walk through somebody else's head. If you came over to my house and saw a pile of shoes, you'd probably take your shoes off. There's a pile of shoes at everybody's door of their minds. Take yours off.

In the Bible, Jesus didn't say anything about leaving shoes at each other's doors, but he did talk about people who walk humbly, people who fear God, and people who know how to

be a friend. We don't have to be the sheriff and straighten everybody out. What we need to do is love God and love people.

It was a lawyer, like me, who was trying to [set up Jesus](#) when he asked, "What's the greatest commandment?" And Jesus replied, "Love God with all your heart and soul and mind, and love your neighbor as yourself." So that's it: Love the people around you. This challenges me to really consider, what if we quit being anonymous to our neighbors? What if we truly *knew* our neighbors? We can't love God the way he wants us to love him if we don't love the people around us, and we can't love the people around us the way that God wants us to love them if we don't love God.

The truth is I've spent my whole life avoiding the people Jesus spent his whole life engaging. So I decided to quit that too. I've decided to instead engage people who bother me—the people I'd normally want to avoid.

60 SECONDS WITH JESUS

One thing that has helped me in my own spiritual life is that I've broken down this idea of following Jesus into 60-second increments. I ask myself, *Could I obey Jesus for 60 seconds in the things that I do and say?* And then for another 60 seconds, and another 60. Maybe there's somebody who's better at this and who could obey Jesus for a whole day—but I don't think so. But when we face tough situations, temptations, or interactions, what if we just chunk it up and ask ourselves, *Could I tolerate this person who is kind of difficult to be around for another 60 seconds?*

That's one critical thing I've changed in my life—I've tried to chunk it up. I only need to know today, tomorrow, and the next day. I just need to obey Jesus for the next 60 seconds. And then I can flip the hourglass over. I've got 60 seconds more in me, don't I? When we think about obeying Jesus for the next 60 seconds, those become the most important 60 seconds.

Of course you aren't going to find anything about 60 seconds with Jesus in the Bible, but you will find a lot of 60-second encounters between Jesus and the people he engaged. Like them, we can focus on each moment—*with* Jesus. Ask yourself: *Can I obey Jesus for just 60 seconds more?* It's what we *do* that inevitably reveals our true faith. I think a lot of us have 60 seconds. And if we don't, we've got at least 30 seconds in us.

These 60-second increments have helped me to focus less on myself and more on Jesus and those around me—those whom he sees as valuable not for what they do, but simply because they *are* valuable.

Let's let people know that they're not invited—they're *welcomed*. They're welcomed right to the feet of Jesus. ●

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Sleepless, Stressed, and Over-Scheduled?

Your body may be trying to tell you something. | **RUTH SOUKUP**

After nearly four straight years of too much stress, too little sleep, practically zero exercise, and way too much travel, my body had finally had enough. Over the course of one painfully long year, I battled the flu, two rounds of strep throat, bronchitis, walking pneumonia, an ear infection, and multiple urinary tract infections.

My body was telling me, in no uncertain terms, that it was all too much for me, and I was mentally and spiritually exhausted as well. My relationships with everyone, including God, were suffering. And yet, I couldn't stop. I wanted to be everything to everyone—Super Mom, Super Wife, Super Blogger, Super Friend, Super Christian—despite the signs that were obvious to everyone but me.

Something had to give.

I wish I could point to a dramatic turning point that changed everything overnight, but balance and wellness don't really work that way. I finally just got sick and tired of being sick and tired all the time. And while it took me a really long time to even acknowledge the problem at all, it has also taken a very long time to begin to correct it, to cut out the unhealthy habits in my life in favor of incorporating healthy ones. It's a process I am still figuring out, and one I will probably have to work at for the rest of my life.

Before I continue, let me just state for the record that I am *by no means* an expert on health and wellness or stress management. I have no background in nutrition. I am not a

sleep expert. I am not a doctor. Nor have I mastered the art of balance.

I am a blogger, wife, mom, and author. I struggle with working too much, sleeping too little, not taking time off, and trying to keep my own stress level under control. I don't eat as healthily as I could or as I know I should. All I can share is what I've learned along the way, as well as a little of what has worked for me.

ADDRESSING STRESS TRIGGERS

To begin the journey of finding balance and wellness, we must first identify what's triggering our stress. Balance in our day-to-day lives is passive, only happening once we are willing to stop doing and start resting, but the act of eliminating the obvious stressors in our life must be active. Reducing our exposure to the things that cause stress is something that each of us can and should work on. Our health depends on it.

Of course, that's easier said than done. The things that cause the greatest degree of stress will vary greatly from person to person and from season to season. However, as a Christian woman, I can generally count on the following three forms of stress:

- *Emotional stress.* This type of stress comes from a trauma or severe emotional blow—betrayal, abuse, an accident or catastrophe, as well as guilt over something we did (or didn't do). It can involve extreme feelings of sadness, remorse, loneliness, grief, fear, anxiety, or even depression.

- *Physical stress.* This type of stress comes from activities that are physically taxing or exhausting, such as travel, physical labor, long work hours, and the care of babies. Lack of sleep or exercise contributes to physical stress, as do poor eating habits and addictions to tobacco, alcohol, or drugs.

- *Spiritual stress.* This may be one of the most overlooked sources of stress. For Christians living in an increasingly secular culture in which traditional beliefs often run counter to political correctness, this stress can manifest itself as shame, guilt (real or false), selfishness, rebellion, or even distancing oneself from God and living out of sync with the way the Bible says we should live.

The reality is that stress can often become a vicious cycle of cause and effect. We feel stressed about one thing, which causes us to sleep less, stop exercising, or work nonstop, which in turn compounds our stress even more. The more stressed we feel, the more it affects everything else around us. The only way to reduce the stress—or eliminate it altogether—is to make conscious healthy choices, even when we really don't feel like it.

DEVELOPING SOLUTIONS

As Christian women, we tend to elevate our spiritual lives above all other areas, though I've found them to be completely intertwined. If we want to see change in one area, we need to make a concerted effort in the others. And in the same vein, positive change in our spiritual lives will create positive change in other areas as well.

When I struggled with depression, I was much more likely to eat junk food instead of cooking a healthy meal. When returning from a hectic week of travel, I am much less likely to

wake up and attend church on Sunday. If my spiritual routine gets out of whack (Sunday mornings, daily prayer times, Bible study, and so on), my home life and sleep cycle soon follow. And so the cycle continues.

In my own battle to combat stress, I've tried to focus on three distinct areas: sleep, exercise, and downtime. Each has had a profound impact on improving my health, healing my immune system, and keeping my stress level down. And while you may think it's just one more thing to add to your schedule, attending weekly church services does a remarkable job of relieving stress as well.

Sleep

A well-rested brain is happier, healthier, and more productive; it's better equipped to handle stress, regardless of where the stress comes from. Sleep changes our perspective. It is the magic bullet and the miracle cure to excess stress. And Scripture has a lot to say about it as well:

"I lie down and sleep; I wake again, because the LORD sustains me." (Psalm 3:5)

"In peace I will lie down and sleep, for you alone, LORD, make me dwell in safety."
(Psalm 4:8)

"In vain you rise early and stay up late, toiling for food to eat—for [God] grants sleep to those he loves." (Psalm 127:2)

"When you lie down, you will not be afraid; when you lie down, your sleep will be sweet." (Proverbs 3:24)

Strive to get the sleep you need. Create a bedtime ritual, be consistent with your bedtime, avoid screens and caffeine before bed, and keep a record of your sleep cycles.

Exercise

Modern life has made it far too easy for most of us to become almost completely sedentary. The average American spends 9.3 hours sitting each day. This lack of movement not only compounds our stress levels but is downright dangerous to our health as well. To get moving without running five miles a day or conquering P90X, try to work standing up, taking a walk every day, stretching frequently throughout the day, or using a pedometer. These seemingly small things will make a big difference in the way you feel day to day, and in the way you handle stress.

Downtime

This one is often the hardest to conquer in a world that is constantly calling us to *do* something, wearing our packed calendars as a badge of honor. But we have to combat the culture of busy in favor of wellness and balance. I start with my calendar and actually plan to do nothing on the weekends (pencil it in!), set a limit on the number of activities our family does each week, and extend ourselves lots of grace when our life may not mirror the

highlight-reel-expectations of social media. And much like sleep, Scripture has a few things to say about rest and downtime:

“The LORD is my shepherd, I lack nothing. He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, he refreshes my soul.” (Psalm 23:1–3)

[Jesus said,] “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.” (Matthew 11:28)

Church Attendance


A number of scientific studies have also proven that going to church has incredible health and wellness benefits. We crave connection and interaction with others, and we long for a place to belong—a community of people who care about us and accept us just as we are. Church fills that need, and it also usually involves prayer, quiet meditation, and music, all of which can help a person feel more relaxed and bring her blood pressure down.

Some studies have even proven that those who attend weekly religious services have a significantly lower risk of depression, better time and life management skills, better grades, a longer life expectancy, and even better sex lives than their non-churchgoing counterparts.

THE POWER OF SMALL CHANGES

Finding balance in a chaotic world is not always about eliminating stress completely, but it is sometimes about the way we handle it. If we work hard to change the small things we *can* control, we will in turn become much better at responding to and handling the things we *cannot* control. While there’s no quick fix to finding balance and maintaining wellness in this chaotic life, I think we owe it to ourselves to put in the work and journey toward a more fulfilled, simplified life. ●

Ruth Soukup is a writer, mom of two girls, and wife to her husband of eight years. She’s the successful founder of LivingWellSpendingLess.com and is the author of *Unstuffed* and *Living Well Spending Less*. This article was adapted from *Unstuffed* by Ruth Soukup. Copyright © 2016 by Ruth Soukup. Used by permission of Zondervan. www.Zondervan.com. All rights reserved.



Leading When You're Not in Charge

You can't lead if you don't know how to follow. | **BIANCA JUAREZ OLTHOFF**

I am second. No, it's not religious humility or self-deprecation. I am literally second. I am a second-born twin in the shared role of first child. I am the second wife to my husband. I'm the second mother to my kids. I am second in my role at work. *I am second.*

Quotes like "Either you're first or you're nothing" and "Second place is the first loser" reinforce the belief that secondary and subsidiary roles are insignificant. But they aren't. In fact, they are needed. In life, liberty, and the pursuit of Jesus, you can't lead if you don't know how to follow.

In the business world, church life, or at home, leadership is often defined as a certain set of skills or characteristics possessed by those in the most prominent role. Yet if leadership is influence, as John Maxwell says, then we each have a powerful role to play in mobilizing people in all spheres of our lives.

Sometimes we must know what something is *not* before we can determine what it *is*. Therefore, let's clear up some of the common misconceptions about leading second.

LEADING SECOND IS NOT BEING PASSIVE

Leading second does not mean neglecting responsibilities or influence by not being at the front or making the final decision. Rather, leading second means harnessing the collective

power of the team to support the main vision or objective, whether in your college, church, community, or cubicle.

For example, my idea of good budgeting is buying a gorgeous purse and surviving on celery and saltines for the month, so my husband manages our finances. I give my opinion, but I understand that he's responsible for the cash flow of Casa Olthoff. He doesn't do that in a controlling or selfish way; in fact, he wants me to help and steer the vision for our family. Yet he bears the weight of making sure we are fiscally responsible. Finances are not my strength, but that doesn't mean I have abdicated my role in handling our funds.

When we understand that we can contribute to something larger than ourselves from second position, it recalibrates our heart and attitude. We cultivate purpose, values, and mission when we move together and willingly submit to the collective whole.

Leading second is not abdicating responsibility because you lack position or title. Although you may never get the recognition, you have an opportunity to speak into the vision and further the mission of your organization from the second chair.

Leading second is not being passive. As an intern, student, stay-at-home mom, or new hire, you are part of the decision-making process whether you want to be or not. You might not have the biggest vote or loudest voice, but you don't sit idly by and watch the vision happen; you make it happen.

Leading second is not an excuse to do little because you are new, shy, or don't have a corner office. Laziness and inattention are byproducts of insecurity and indifference.

The common theme that begins to rise to the surface is that being second doesn't mean that you aren't seen. In fact, we know that what God rewards openly what he sees in secret ([Matthew 6:4](#)).

LEADING SECOND IS BEING PURPOSEFUL

Leading second lends itself to doing things that may not be rewarded in the moment. Late hours at the office, kind words spoken in return for harsh words, and saying yes to another project when your time is already maxed are a few of the scenarios we may find ourselves in. Therefore, leading second is an opportunity to be faithful with what you are called to, and to allow God, who sees all things, to bring about future promotion, blessing, and favor.

Leading second is purposeful, not accidental. We step intentionally into our role in domestic decisions, boardroom policies, or academic pursuits.

Leading second is collaborative and cooperative. We build up our family members, teammates, and coworkers so they can lean in and build the collective vision instead of building individual agendas.

WE ARE ALL SECOND

Ultimately, we are all second. Paul, an apostle and leader, summed it up best: "You should imitate me, just as I imitate Christ" (1 Corinthians 11:1). We are all second to the One, followers to the greatest leader of all. When you learn to carry the vision, you will learn to

lead the vision. But you need to be willing to learn, listen, and lean into being second.
Learning to follow will prepare to you lead. ●



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Jump off the Motherhood Pendulum

Moms, let's live rooted in Christ. | **SANDY HAMSTRA**

didn't realize how much I value freedom until I became a mom.

As the mother of three small kids, I had a tough time bringing the concept of freedom into my new reality. My life was in constant motion every day. It felt like a pendulum swinging between delight in my role as a mom and despair at my unmet personal needs. I felt confused that a role so fulfilling could leave me feeling disconnected, unsettled, and constantly in motion but going nowhere. At a moment's notice, my emotions could sway from one extreme to the other, the volatility and loss of control leaving me motion sick.

Let's never pretend that this pendulum swing doesn't exist. Being a mom can be so beautiful and tender that we think we might burst, only then to encounter moments so difficult and draining that we feel like giving up. We are *blessed, obsessed, then over it and done*, familiar language in the narrative of motherhood.

Motherhood does not have to be viewed as the sole purpose of our existence, nor does it have to be a series of stages we must endure. Riding that pendulum back and forth between idolization and victimization can create instability not only in our family life but also in our soul.

GETTING FREE FROM EXTREMES

So how can we get off the swinging pendulum and find a better place to land our feet—one that doesn't deny the difficult reality of raising kids but does provide the stability we need to

cope with it?

I didn't understand the power of freedom in Jesus until I had lived without it for quite some time. I needed Jesus, but I mistook that need for other things I lacked—such as free time, more sleep, and personal space. *If I could get those things back, I kept thinking, then I could get my life in order.*

I eventually learned that to experience real freedom meant I had to make a jump, to get off the pendulum, constantly swinging from emotional highs to lows, and plant my feet on a foundation that would allow me to navigate the challenges of motherhood in a new way.

LANDING ON OUR OWN STRENGTH

When we feel a loss of control, we tend to grasp for some type of security. Maybe it's better boundaries, increased resources, acquiring more knowledge, or gaining greater efficiency. We build plans, set goals, make spreadsheets, schedule meals—all to engineer a better outcome than what we're experiencing.

When the chaos of motherhood overwhelmed me, I took another approach. As a natural free spirit, I didn't reach for plans or charts to help me gain control. I resorted to an attitude of independence. I rewrote the definition of *freedom* in my own language and on my own terms. I reasoned that if I could dismiss other peoples' opinions, judgments, and expectations of me, then I could draw confidence from my amazing ability to *not* follow protocol.

I didn't have to be a Pinterest mom or a room mom or a homemade-cookie mom because I was my own woman! Nonconformity was my default. That gave me a sense of freedom as a mom.

Even as I embraced that mindset, I still liked that Jesus said he is our foundation ([Matthew 7:24-27](#)). I even believed it. His Word made me feel good—an assurance that if the bottom dropped out on my free-spirit approach, I still had a backup plan.

But the truth is that I'd jumped from the pendulum and landed on my own manufactured foundation, a procurement of my own version of freedom. Yes, Jesus was in the picture, but I was viewing him as the safety net below me instead of the very ground upon which I walk every day. For me, *free spirit* was just a fancy title for pride, and it was a terrible substitute for security. I was no longer swinging with the pendulum, but I was standing on a foundation made of self—full of sin and starved of God.

Over time I started to recognize that there is bondage in the spirit of self-sufficiency, but in the Spirit of the Lord there is true *freedom* ([2 Corinthians 3:17](#)).

Jesus offers everyone (not just moms) a new and better foundation for life when we seek him instead of ourselves. Instead of seeing motherhood and its demands as a barrier to our freedom, we can see it as an opportunity to grow in our dependence on God.

FINDING STABILITY WITH FREEDOM

When I took myself out of the equation and really sought God as my foundation, I grew stronger in ways I would have never expected.

Instead of asking how I could become a better mom, wife, coworker, friend, or daughter, I set out to be a better disciple of Christ. As I prayed for wisdom and lived out my faith in community, my perspective on motherhood was renewed and my goals changed. I no longer wanted to keep only the good parts of motherhood while leaving behind the bad; I started to see it all as an opportunity for growth.

When we plant our feet on a foundation of God's love, we find both stability and freedom. I still acknowledge that motherhood is both challenging and beautiful, but I have learned to see that wide range in light of God's character rather than allowing the constant oscillation to destabilize me. Instead of being a renegade, seeking my own rights, I've found sustenance and power in a God who is greater, a foundation that is stronger.

Oswald Chambers references the [example of Paul](#) having been crucified with Christ when he [writes](#): "His individuality had been broken and his spirit had been united with his Lord; not just merged into Him, but made one with Him. ' . . . you shall be free indeed'—free to the very core of your being; free from the inside to the outside. We tend to rely on our own energy, instead of being energized by the power that comes from identification with Jesus."

Our responsibility as moms who love Jesus is not to engineer stability on our own but to point our kids to a God who is enough. When we jump from the pendulum, our own instincts will not provide stability and strength. That comes from God, our foundation. We live grounded yet free, and work through the chaos of motherhood with eyes on eternity. ●

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Embracing Cultural Moments

Using truth and grace to explore hidden cultural divides



Helen Lee is a TCW editorial advisor and columnist, an associate editor with InterVarsity Press, and the author of *The Missional Mom*.

I was attending a conference and having lunch with a group of acquaintances when the conversation turned to favorite comfort foods. The answers ranged from tater-tot casserole to roasted pork shoulder to sweet potato pie. Then someone happened to mention sushi in a passing remark. I was about to declare my own love for Japanese cuisine when a 20something woman named Jenny blurted out, “Oh, yuck! I think that’s disgusting!”

I glanced around the table to see if anyone else felt uncomfortable hearing these words and realized that I was once again in a context where I was the only Asian American, the only person of color.

For a moment, I was too embarrassed to admit my own culinary leanings, but I knew that I could not let it pass. “Actually, I really love sushi,” I admitted as the expression on Jenny’s face turned from disgust to disbelief. I could also see a hint of remorse at her outburst, a flare of recognition that she had unwittingly stumbled into the invisible realm of culture.

THE INVISIBLE WORLD

Culture is a word that is challenging to define and is used in myriad ways, many of which are quite different from one another. There’s pop culture, corporate culture, multiculturalism, and the list goes on. Andy Crouch’s seminal book, *Culture Making*, describes culture as what human beings make of the world. I appreciate this definition for the way it encourages

people to pursue acts of creation as a way to change culture.

But that conceptualization of culture addresses the more visible, outward form of culture that tells only a part of the whole story. There is another way to think about culture that is equally important: the often invisible way *culture makes us*. This includes a range of forces and factors such as our ethnic or racial heritage, the part of the world or country we grew up in, and the generation of which we are a part. Culture shapes us, molds us, and guides us in small and large ways, from our personal tastes and preferences in food to our social circles to our values and convictions to our lifestyle choices.

Unless we are aware of the ways in which culture exerts its invisible influence on our lives, we, too, can stumble into situations in which we say and do things that hamper the **ministry of reconciliation** to which all Christians have been called. To be agents of reconciliation, we must understand cultural forces and how they shape us on a daily basis, often in subtle ways.

SHAPED BY CULTURE

In some cases, the culture that has formed us has brought us closer to the kingdom of God. For example, for many years I attended an Asian-American church in which the children referred to all the adults with the titles *Uncle* and *Auntie*. It was a lovely way to reinforce the idea that we are all part of one spiritual family, born from a cultural context in which the concept of family is particularly significant.

The danger comes when we do not recognize the ways in which culture affects us, and that keeps us from building bridges with one another, especially with those who may be different from us.

The issue with my lunch companion Jenny was not that she didn't like sushi. It was the manner in which she expressed her displeasure, without recognizing that her own cultural experiences had brought her to disparage others' preferences. She had unknowingly developed a sense of what was normative, assuming that "normal" American taste does not include a love for sushi such as I have—along with millions of other Americans, including many who are not of Asian descent.

We Christians are bound together as one family of God; we have access to unity through the bond of Christ. Yet that doesn't eradicate our cultural differences and biases. Our calling as reconcilers means that we must rely on that bond in Christ to help us better understand each other and our differences, to speak the truth in love when injustices and prejudice exists, and to extend grace when misunderstandings occur, as they inevitably will.

MAKING CULTURE VISIBLE

A few days after the lunch incident, I ended up sharing another meal with the same group of women who had been discussing comfort foods. And, wouldn't you know it, the topic of sushi came up again. I realized that while my previous response to the issue, though perfectly acceptable, did little to advance true cultural understanding and growth. For that to happen, I'd have to take a risk.

So I took a deep, invisible breath, then turned my attention to Jenny. “You know, I was thinking about our conversation about sushi earlier in the week. I totally understand that it might sound pretty nasty. But I’d be happy to explain more about it if you’re interested. There are options that don’t even involve raw fish at all.”

Pause.

Would she repeat the disdain she had shown during our first conversation? Would she feel as though I were patronizing her in some way? Would she reject my invitation?

Jenny smiled and nodded. “Sure, that could be good,” she replied. “It’s true, I don’t really know much about it. Maybe I need to give it a chance.”

It was a small moment, one that wouldn’t undo centuries of cultural misunderstanding, but it was a moment nonetheless when the invisible realm of culture was made visible through our mutual effort at gaining understanding.

GRACE-FILLED MOMENTS

Sometimes when we make these kinds of overtures toward one another, things do not go so smoothly. That doesn’t mean we should ignore or brush aside the cultural realities around us. It means that we must continually offer a tremendous amount of grace to one another in this journey, especially since culture’s impact on us all is often invisible.

Consider [Colossians 1:16](#): “For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible . . . all things have been created through him and for him” (NIV).

Understanding the cultures that have had a part in shaping each of us may be seen as a mysterious and perplexing endeavor at times. Yet all these dynamics are perfectly clear to the God of the universe, who created all these cultural forces to begin with. As we journey to greater unity in the midst of our diverse identities and backgrounds, may we continue to rely on his light and love to guide us toward more and more grace-filled moments of cultural understanding. ●



● Abide

Consider it All Loss

Centering our lives on Jesus, no matter the cost | **TRILLIA NEWBELL**

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hat does it mean to live with Christ at the center of our lives? To have him at the core of all that we are, all that we do, all that we believe? It often means being willing to lose a few things.

Paul knew about this sort of costly loss, and he powerfully explored it in [Philippians 3:1-14](#). In his Jewish culture at that time, Paul had been in a position of spiritual and ethnic superiority. He was a Pharisee (a keeper of the law, a position of honor) and had an impressive Jewish pedigree. He had even persecuted Christians (verses 5-6). He had a heritage and legacy that would be envied by others. If anyone could have “confidence in the flesh” (verse 3, *ESV*), Paul could! Yet Paul urged the Philippian Christians—and us—to “put no confidence in the flesh.”

What is it that *we* place our confidence in? What are some things that *we* might boast in? What might *we* consider too great or too important to ever give up in order to truly live for Christ?

For some of us it could be money. Money has a way of making us feel secure. The allure of riches and all the comfort that can come with money make it hard to give up. That was certainly the case for the rich young man ([Mark 10:17-27](#)). We know the story—he saw the Lord, he desired to follow him, but when the choice had to be made, he wouldn’t give up all he had for Jesus.

For some of us, it may be a relationship or a job. Or maybe it’s the thought of facing your family with the news that you are a Christian—and the high cost that would have in your life.

Whatever it is for you, there's always a temptation for each of us to place something above our Lord.

Paul doesn't share all of his reasons for confidence in the flesh in order to boast about himself. No, he shares it so that we might know how *worthy* Jesus truly is. Paul counted all of it—his Jewish pedigree and social status—as loss, as “rubbish” compared to the worth of knowing Christ (verse 8). For the sake of Christ, Paul truly lost it all—eventually even dying for his faith.

Paul's sacrifice, suffering, and loss were all so that he might “gain Christ and be found in him” (verses 8–9). Paul knew he was found in Christ *because of Christ*—not because of his own righteousness or the law. Paul wrote that “by any means possible”—essentially that he was willing to go through whatever it took—he desired to be with his Savior forever (verse 11).

When life distracts us, when temptations compete for our attention, we need to re-center all we are on Jesus. By any means possible, regardless of the cost, Jesus ought to be our true focus in life. As Paul reminds us, Jesus is *worth* all loss, all sacrifice, and all suffering. Jesus is worth it because he is the God-man who sacrificed himself for us. We can love God only and always because God first loved us and sent his Son to die for us ([1 John 4:19](#); [John 3:16](#)).

We must also resolve to know, as Paul knew, that to abide in Christ and to give everything up for him is not what saves us. Our works or our good deeds, even our sacrifices for Christ, do not save us; it is by grace that we are saved through faith, and this is the work of the Lord and his grace ([Ephesians 2:8–10](#)). Our sacrifices for the sake of Christ are not to somehow gain favor before the Lord; rather, these losses are meant to show the surpassing worth of Jesus.

Like Paul, we want to “press on” in faith (Philippians 3:12) knowing that nothing can or will separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus ([Romans 8:38–39](#)).

Yet in our culture, we may at times be faced with this question: Is Jesus worth the trouble? Is Jesus more important than our reputation? Are we willing to sacrifice and suffer for our Lord?

Let's ask the Lord to help us say *yes*.

Paul knew he wasn't able to do anything apart from Christ, and neither are we. We need *Christ* to help us follow Christ. As you seek to live with him at your center, as you face loss and sacrifice in order to put Jesus first, ask him to help. Ask Jesus to give you the strength to endure, whatever the cost, knowing that one day you'll enjoy the reward of being with him for eternity. ●



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