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# Why Mowing the Lawn can be Complicated (Chapter 6 from *Worthy: Finding Yourself in a World Expecting Someone Else*)

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# W O R T H Y

*Finding Yourself in a World  
Expecting Someone Else*

MELANIE SPRINGER MOCK



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## WORTHY

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# WHY MOWING THE LAWN CAN BE COMPLICATED

**T**his first point is important to know: I had the best grandpa in the world.

Murray Springer lived his entire life in central Illinois, mostly in Hopedale, a small Mennonite farming community near Peoria. He was a foreman for the Caterpillar tractor company and worked the night shift. By the time I came around, he was retired, spending his mornings drinking coffee uptown and his afternoons drinking beer in his garage. He was what people might call a “man’s man,” someone who enjoyed Kool cigarettes, Schlitz beer from a can, and the World Wrestling Federation on television. He was a fan of boxing and Smokin’ Joe Frazier. He loved meat and potatoes.

When I was a girl, Murray Springer, the best grandpa in the world, was my hero. And this made the lesson I learned from him about gender roles even more difficult to bear.

As a ten-year-old, I idolized my grandpa so much that I requested a pair of bib overalls for my birthday so I could match my grandpa's wardrobe. He'd give me his old Dekalb Seed caps, which I wore with the bill tilted slightly to the right, just like Grandpa. The smell of his sweaty bald head lingered in the hat's mesh, and when I'd go home after a visit, I could inhale the sweat-and-cigarette fragrance of the cap and be transported back to Hopedale and the best grandpa in the world.

In the summer, my siblings and I spent one or two weeks in Hopedale, giving my parents a respite. Our grandparents' small house was an oasis, with sugared cereal every breakfast, an unlimited supply of popsicles, an ample yard for Wiffle ball games, and, for me, hours of hanging out with Grandpa. He and I sat out in the garage in matching lawn chairs, drinking from the beverage cans he stored in the extra refrigerator: Schlitz for him, Shasta cream soda for me. Some days I'd ride along while he did chores for his farmer friends, sitting in the front seat of his Chevy, each of us with an arm crooked out an open window.

We were compadres, my grandpa and me . . . until it came time for my grandparents to dole out chores. Then Grandpa would send me into the kitchen to help my grandma with meal preparation, and he'd call my brother outside to mow the yard, help him in the garden, or pick up sticks around the big oak tree. I'd go inside begrudgingly, never happy to be confined in the air-conditioned house knowing my Dekalb Seed cap and bib overalls were irrelevant for the kind of work I'd be doing.

Don't get me wrong: I loved my grandma. But I didn't feel especially suited to the chores she wanted me to do. While I snapped green beans with Grandma at the kitchen sink, I could see my brother's dour face, now puffy with allergies, riding

the lawnmower back and forth across my grandparents' vast yard. It didn't make sense to me. I wanted so badly to be outside, working with Grandpa, doing physical labor in the hot sun, and I knew my brother much preferred being inside with Grandma, where the air was always cooler and the television always on.

This was my first lesson in gender inequity. Girls did *not* do heavy labor, including mowing the lawn. Boys who chose to work in the kitchen were sissies, no matter their personal preference or how much they loved watching *As the World Turns* every afternoon at one o'clock Central. I don't blame my grandparents for their entrenched beliefs. My grandparents grew up in a different time and lived in a small midwestern town where traditional gender roles were never questioned.

Some believe that this sense of specific gender roles is anachronistic and that girls and boys learn today that they can be whatever they long to be. To some extent, this is true. More than ever before, girls are allowed to dream big about their vocations—much bigger than I could even thirty years ago, when my announcement to a classmate that I wanted to be a farmer was met with a smirk. A farmer's wife, maybe. But the one running the machinery, strong-arming livestock, driving the combine? Not likely.

We've come a long way, baby. Today, young women graduate from college at rates higher than their male peers, and are just as likely to enter occupations that were once dominated by men. A 2014 report by the White House Council of Economic Advisers showed that women are becoming doctors, lawyers, and business administrators at the same rate as they are assuming jobs as teachers, nurses, or administrative assistants, roles traditionally considered more suitable for women.<sup>1</sup> Similarly,

men are taking on roles that would have at one time been considered too feminine. Nursing programs have an increasing number of male students, and more men than ever before are choosing to be elementary teachers. (Never mind that a disparity in earning means that women's paychecks are still smaller than those of men in similar positions doing similar work.<sup>2</sup>)

We might be inclined to believe that the glass ceiling has truly been dismantled and that our daughters can assume and excel at any vocation they choose. For many people in the United States, the 2016 presidential election—the first in which a woman ran as a major party presidential candidate—proved once and for all that gender discrimination is a thing of past. For others, Hillary Clinton's loss to Donald Trump signaled that sexism is alive and well.

Many people no longer fret over concerns about clearly defined gender roles. If he were alive today, Murray Springer might be able to see how silly it was to make his granddaughter snap beans when she clearly preferred mowing the yard. The fact that my sons recognize lawn mowing as a chore their mom nearly always does suggests we don't automatically assume there are substantially different roles for men and women in private and public life.

Yet in many Christian circles, the mythology persists that God assigns different roles to men and women—not only assigns these roles, but also demands that people remain within them no matter their gifting or their interests. This mythology undergirds much of Christian culture's teaching about the place women can have in leadership, and it compels a good number of churches to assert that women cannot serve as church leaders, because doing so would transgress God's design for women's lives. The myth about God's design for women and

men shapes the ways we talk about marriage and family and distorts the ways both men and women relate to God and to each other. It creates cognitive dissonance for young people who struggle to reconcile what they see as their calling with what they hear from Christian leaders.

More than that, though, this idea of “God’s design” means that many people, both women and men, are funneled into molds that fit uncomfortably, if at all. The idea also sets up expectations that cannot always be met and leads to moments of real despair for those who cannot fill the roles they’ve supposedly been designed to fill. This can cause acute feelings of unworthiness. Finding ourselves in a world expecting someone else means acknowledging that gender does not always determine one’s calling. It means challenging systems and institutions that codify gender injustice, in North America and around the world. It means creating a different world, one where women and men truly are free to be who and what God intended.

**I REMEMBER EXACTLY WHERE I WAS** when I decided to play middle school football. Fifth and sixth graders in Hillsboro were bused ten miles away to Durham each day, and once, on the way back from our daily trip through Kansas wheat fields, I announced to the kids sitting next to me that I would be trying out for football in the fall instead of volleyball. Maybe I’d had an especially inspired day in phys ed class, serving on the offensive line for our flag football team and blocking the girls on the other side so that Mike, our quarterback, could make a long pass before getting his flag ripped from his belt. Mike always played quarterback, of course, because he was blond, handsome, athletic, and the alpha male of sixth grade.



The other guys served as receivers, and girls took the less glamorous roles. Apparently I thought that if I could play football during class, I might as well try out for the team. And so, on a bus grinding its gears toward Hillsboro, I let others know about my ambitions.

“Yeah, right,” Lane said, his prepubescent lip curling into a sneer. “That’s dumb.”

“No, it’s not,” I insisted. Hadn’t he seen the way I pushed Laurie so hard off the front line that she’d cried? Didn’t he see her slump to the sideline, claiming my block had somehow broken her glasses? Didn’t this prove I was tough enough?

“Girls don’t play football,” Lane said. The clump of boys sitting behind him laughed in agreement. “What an idiot.”

I wanted to tell him *he* was the idiot, and that girls do play football. But I knew at some level that trying out for the middle school team was foolhardy. The next fall, I’d be wearing those awful polyester volleyball uniforms with too-tight shorts and silly looking knee pads, trying not to panic every time a ball was served toward my head. My desire to put on a helmet and tackle some kids would never be realized. Lane was right: girls did not play football. At least not when it mattered.

By the time I was twelve, I had already internalized messages about what was possible for me as a girl and what was not. I also knew that girls were not worth as much as boys and that boys would always get to do more fun, more challenging, more adventurous stuff, just because. These messages came not from my parents, both of whom were fairly progressive and wanted their daughters to dream big. Instead, I had learned from my community, my culture, my extended family, and my church what girls should not do, given their biological design, their weaker bodies, and their presumably natural inclinations.

In this regard, not much has changed. Girls still don't go out for football—or, the girls who do are lionized in the media as bizarre freaks of nature. There are semiprofessional organizations for women who play football, but until 2013, this league was called the “Lingerie Football League” and women wore bikini panties and bras under their shoulder pads.

So yes, even though there is growing equity in the professional roles men and women enter, great disparity remains. We generally assume that some jobs are more suitable for men and some jobs more suitable for women. Indeed, we need look no further than politics in the United States to see how firmly we have accepted the mythology that men are naturally inclined to be strong leaders and that women—given their tendency to be emotive and their desire to be peacemakers—will not be as successful. Why has it taken until 2016 for a woman to be nominated for president by a major party? Whether we want to admit it or not, voting for a woman in leadership means fighting against the presumption that women are not natural leaders. This is especially true in Christian circles. In the run-up to the 2016 presidential election, a number of websites were considering the quandary in which white evangelical Christians found themselves: should they vote for a presumably ungodly man, like Donald Trump, or a woman, Hillary Clinton?

Although many evangelical Christian voters claimed they supported Trump because of his pro-life platform, many also couldn't bring themselves to vote for a woman as a leader of the most powerful nation in the world, since God had not designed women to lead. In postmortems of the 2016 election, pollsters discovered that a majority of white women voted for Trump, even after the candidate was caught boasting about actions that amounted to sexual assault. Although many of

these voters said they chose the Republican candidate because of his anti-abortion platform and his economic policies, they were also electing a man who said that women who had been harassed on the job should simply find another job—if women even should be working at all.<sup>3</sup>

Christians who believe strongly in God's specific design for men and women will point to the first chapters of Genesis, asserting that Eve was created from Adam's rib as a helpmeet. God's creative act puts men in charge, with women serving as their helpers and taking on roles that originally allowed Adam to do the hard work of tending a garden, naming every species of animal, and being the provider. Some Christians argue that this reflects men's natural tendency toward operating in the public sphere, and that Adam, being initially a perfect reflection of God's image, had the strength and capabilities necessary to be a leader—as does every man who has followed, given that he is a son of Adam.

Those daughters of Eve? As the first woman, crafted from the rib of Adam, and given the role of helping her spouse, Eve provides the model for every woman born thereafter. Even the physical design of women, it is argued, reflects this theory. Women are less strong than men, less able to be providers or hunters and gatherers, built rather to be nurturers of others. This, some who believe in "God's design" might say, was written right into Adam and Eve's DNA.

This particular understanding of "God's design" is complicated by many Christians' affirmation that God *did* design the world through God's creative act and then called it good. Is it possible to hold in tension this sense that God designed my intricate body, gendered female by my DNA, as well as the belief that this gendering does not necessarily determine what

roles I can play in my personal and professional life? According to complementarian theology, “God’s design” insists that both are intricately linked and that *because of* God’s creation of my XX chromosomes—my imprint as a daughter of Eve—I am designed to assume a specific place in my world, even if that place doesn’t specifically suit me.

Some Christians assume a different posture toward gender roles, one that nonetheless lands at the same complementarian ideology: God desires specific and compatible but distinct roles for men and women to be maintained, thanks to the fall. In Genesis 2, this line of thinking goes, both Adam and Eve played the same roles in the garden because God made men and women equal in all things. Then Eve bungled things up by making sure Adam ate from the tree of knowledge. Thus, while it’s not God’s *will* that men and women take on different roles, what can you do? The fall has messed up everything, sin runs rampant, and as a result, boys get to play football while girls are consigned to wearing polyester volleyball shorts.

Those who perpetuate the myth of gender roles assume that this understanding of gender is inviolate. Even men’s and women’s bodies, they say, demonstrate that we are supposed to assume different roles in the world. The “God’s design” folks will show how a woman’s uterus and breasts mean that she is built primarily to birth children and nurture them and that men, with their stronger physiques, are created to go out into the world to provide for women. For some, this physical manifestation of God’s intentions for women and men is also written into their internal wiring. According to John Eldredge, author of the popular book *Wild at Heart*, men are encoded with the desire to pursue princesses, to embrace their own warrior spirits, and to be providers and protectors and leaders.

This wild heart might be battered by contemporary culture's insistence that men be emotive and relational, Eldredge asserts, but buried deep inside, beneath the culture's emasculating detritus, a warrior stands at the ready. Real men, godly men, will peel back that effeminate shell to find their true, divinely designed selves, and all will be right with the world.

Eldredge published *Wild at Heart* in 2001; a companion book for women, called *Captivating* (published with Eldredge's spouse, Stasi), continued the theme of God's design, letting women know that their own hearts have been distorted by those who would want them to be equal to men. Women don't actually want to be strong, independent leaders, the Eldredges believe. Instead, women long to be pursued by their warriors, to be cared for, to be treated like the princesses they are certainly designed to be. Contemporary culture—what with its attempts to give women equality with men—has tamped the desires of women's hearts way, way down deep.

The impact of the Eldredges' theory about gender—for it is only a theory, after all—cannot be understated. Their books have fueled an entire industry of Christian products designed to help women and men discover their true, God-given roles, roles the Eldredges believe have been so obliterated by contemporary culture as to be unrecognizable. The millions of Christians who have taken the Eldredges' message to heart hear that these theories are, in fact, biblical, and that more than anything else, God longs for men to be warriors and women to be princesses. The Eldredges' ability to perpetuate the myth of God-sanctified gender roles would be laughable save for this enormous influence.

When I think about the men in my life, it's hard for me to find a warrior among them. Perhaps my work in an English

department somehow shields me from knowing true warrior-men. My male colleagues, whom I love and admire deeply, are more inclined to spend a quiet evening at home reading Thoreau or C. S. Lewis than to run through the woods to find their warrior hearts. I've also never fancied my husband, a terrific father and loving partner, as a wild-at-heart man, machete raised, ready to massacre anything that stands in the way of his finding his princess. And me as a princess, waiting in the highest turret for him to arrive? Laughable. I'd probably wonder what the heck was taking him so long, and why he got to have all the fun, running through the woods.

Now, it could be that my decidedly unwarrior-like colleagues are deluding themselves, and that I am as well. It could be that we have all buried our true natures so deeply that the very idea of becoming a warrior—or a princess—is inconceivable. John Eldredge would like us to believe this: that the essence of who men and women are, given their different genders, has been obfuscated by feminists who want to make everyone equal. In this view, feminists have worked hard to destroy the very traits that make women's specific roles so special, so necessary to the kingdom, so distinct from the roles given to men.

Or it could be that the very idea of gender roles is based on contemporary cultural stereotypes about men and women, dealing less with biological determinism and more with the ways Eldredge et al. would like people to be. Because when we say that all men are wild at heart, and all women long to be captivating, we begin to shove people into molds that might well fit uncomfortably, no matter their XX or XY chromosomes. We also make people aware of their inherent unworthiness if they don't want to be warriors or princesses, letting them know there is something wrong with *them* rather than

with the *Wild at Heart* theology that demands all women, and all men, be exactly the same.

**BACK WHEN I WAS TWELVE** and dreaming of being a football player or a farmer, I didn't realize that farming was part of my heritage, a lineage that ran through my mother's family. My grandma herself had been a farmer, long before I was born. My maternal grandfather, Theodore Schmidt, farmed near Goessel, Kansas, growing wheat and raising livestock until his untimely death at fifty-nine, when my mom, the youngest of five, was a first-year student in college. For a time after his death, my grandma Mary continued to operate the farm, taking on the many jobs her husband once did. Those who embrace an understanding of God's design for men and women would say that she was not suited to be a farmer and that she should not have taken on roles reserved for men. But she *had* to assume chores; she had no other choice.

This is also lost in the "God's design" debates: when people talk about God-created gender roles, they are doing so from a place of privilege—one that says women choose to operate in the public sphere and that those making the choice to work outside the home are not following the desire of God's heart. This privilege was most obvious to me when I became a working mother, my radar finely attuned to those who argue that women should stay home and act as nurturers, the number one role for which God had designed them. One Tuesday, after picking up my son from my mother's (where he spent every Tuesday while I worked), I was listening to the Dr. Laura show on the radio. I listened to Dr. Laura religiously, even if I didn't buy into her religion; it was my own form of masochism, I'm sure.

At any rate, Dr. Laura was castigating yet another mom who was working outside the home, letting her know she needed to quit her job immediately. When the mother said the family relied on her income, Dr. Laura began berating the woman's husband, whom she saw as an unfit provider. The husband needed to take on two or three jobs, however many necessary, so that the woman could stay home, Dr. Laura said; only then would they be fulfilling their proper roles. Only then would they be happy. Even though I was tapped out from working full-time and caring for my kid, I knew Dr. Laura's advice seemed silly and narrow-minded. Why was it solely a man's responsibility to provide for a family, especially if that meant he worked multiple jobs and never saw his children? This seemed unfair to him, putting on him not only the onus of providing, but also the costs in terms of separation from his kids.

As I immersed myself in Christian culture, though, studying this idea of God's design, I learned that Dr. Laura's advice was fairly mainstream and that many Christians believed women should assume the role of nurturer for the family, and men the role of provider. Not only was this view widespread, it was also based on several assumptions: That women always had spouses who could work outside the home. That men could always find jobs, or several jobs, to support a family. That women were far better than men at taking care of children, and men far better at being providers. Imagine, then, what a single mother must hear when she is told that God has designed her to nurture her children but not support them. Or when a father who delights in spending time with his children learns that he needs to work several jobs to provide for his family, giving him little time to see his kids develop. He may



also learn he is a poor provider, and thus ungodly, because he needs so many jobs to make ends meet. Both women and men who operate outside the stipulations of this paradigm may feel inherently unworthy, challenged to live in roles for which they are poorly equipped.

This idea of God's design also does not consider the ways women throughout history have been integrally involved in the work of tending livestock, raising crops, working in factories. It is Western-focused, and it neglects the fact that throughout the world, women work outside the home, often by necessity. In times of war especially, when men left for the battlefield and casualties decimated the workforce, women stepped into jobs normally considered "men's work." During the Civil War and the First and Second World Wars, women worked in industry and on farms. While visiting India a few years ago, I saw countless women hauling bricks for construction, toiling in the hot Delhi sun to build sidewalks. This kind of work was probably not their ideal, but I imagine they had little other choice. Although some Christians would certainly argue that their need to work outside the home doing heavy labor is a result of the fall and sin's entry in the world, such claims feel disingenuous. That's because the argument changes shape when considering women in the United States, where men are told, à la Dr. Laura, to do everything in their powers to keep women in their "designed" role. This assertion is incredibly weighted by privilege and assumes that God's design applies only to those in Western countries, not to women in other parts of the world.

If that's the case, can it really be God's design at all? Or is it just one more way that Christian culture tries to keep a woman in a carefully proscribed role, letting her know she's unworthy of exploring her own unique calling?

**RIGHT BEFORE I ENTERED NINTH GRADE**, my family moved from Hillsboro, Kansas, to Albany, Oregon. My dad assumed a new pastoral role at a Mennonite church in Albany. I don't know if my dad really knew how much more conservative our new church was until we were already planted in Albany, living in a too-small house while my mom pined for the expansive parsonage we'd left behind.

Our new church had very particular views about women in leadership positions, making it clear that women were designed by God to teach other women and children, make coffee, and organize meals when needed. Early in my dad's tenure in the church, we met Lois, a fiery, outspoken woman who clearly had gifts in leadership—gifts she used to manage a large strawberry farm but that could not be called upon in the church. I remember Lois as a diminutive woman with a loud voice, a person I both admired and feared (the latter mostly because I was an inept strawberry picker, and when I was under her employ she sometimes chastised me for leaving too many ripe berries to rot). But I also respected Lois's passion for peace-making and her persistent witness in church about justice. It was a witness that Lois could never share from the pulpit, since that was not a space where women could stand, figuratively or literally. At the church where my dad pastored, and at countless churches still, Christians hew closely to the words set forth in 1 Timothy 2, where Paul writes, "I permit no woman to teach or have authority over a man; she is to keep silent." Although many Christians read this passage within its historical context and within the context of Paul's other writings, a number still interpret this as God throwing down his order that women remain silent. Paul has been used as a fine surgical tool for removing women's voices and for compelling churches to split

hairs about what women can and cannot do solely because of their gender.

This meant that Lois—fearless, articulate, passionate Lois—could speak to her congregation, but only from the floor of the sanctuary, not from behind the pulpit. Talk about sticking to the letter of the law but not its spirit! The church’s elders let her know that her voice mattered, but less than that of *any* man in the church, who could pull himself up from the wooden benches and proceed to the pulpit to read Scripture, make announcements, share prayer concerns. It didn’t matter what he said, because he was a man, and thus designed by God to speak truths in the ways even the most gifted woman could not.

My church was not unusual in this kind of hairsplitting, and other women have told me stories about the ways their congregations chose to divine what Paul was writing about in 1 Timothy 2: They could speak from a music stand, but not a pulpit. They could speak at Sunday or Wednesday night services, but not on Sunday mornings. They could teach Sunday school to children (boy, could they ever do that!), but they could not teach Sunday school to adults, or at least not adults who were men. They could preach at women-only conferences, but if the audience was mixed-gender, a man also needed to be part of the stage, exerting his authority over the gathering.

The truth is, this idea of silence and God’s design for women has been used for generations to keep women silent. If a woman wants to speak, she has very few avenues within the church to do so, and must always wonder whether what she is doing matches her “design” or whether it is somehow outside of God’s will. At times, this demand that women remain muted has come at great cost to women, especially those who have experienced abuse and who are told that silence is the

appropriate response to male power. Women's silence in the face of assault is one of many outcomes of this message that a woman's voice is not as valuable as a man's. There are cases at Christian universities where female students, having reported their abuse to administrators, are disciplined for "fornicating" or are not believed or are told that staying silent about assault might be the best, most godly thing they can do.<sup>4</sup> Other church organizations and denominations have also kept women silent in the face of abuse, believing—implicitly, at least—that women had no voice in the church. Attempts to silence women's voices—and assertions that such silencing is biblical—are one more way we have told women that their experiences are not worthy, even when those experiences are traumatic and life-changing. Saving men's reputations and the reputations of the institutions they represent seems to matter so much more.

**IT HAPPENS EVERY SEMESTER:** a student comes into my office, feeling angst about her calling and about what her parents and her conservative culture have told her she should be. Often these conversations turn tearful as the student expresses real conflict about what her evangelical upbringing taught her and what she is experiencing in college. Through their time at George Fox, students discover they have agency, voices, and vocations, which is exactly what a liberal arts college should be teaching them. Many students have grown up learning that women need to remain silent, passive, and focused on becoming wives and mothers. This dissonance creates inner turmoil for students, who come to faculty offices expressing a desire to follow their callings but who also believe their vocational aspirations might be against God's will.

So my female students wonder: Could they really be pastors and church leaders, even though the Bible—or, really, a specific reading of the Bible—had told them women should remain silent? Could they forego marriage and motherhood, at least for a while, to pursue a career, even though they were told that being a wife and mother was their highest calling? How could they square what they were beginning to believe with what they had been told the Bible says? It is all so confusing, so disruptive to their sense of self.

One of the distinct messages people hear about God’s design for gender is that any calling which runs counter to that design must be sublimated. A woman who feels called to church leadership isn’t hearing God correctly; she must be seeking a position as lead pastor because of selfish conceit. Countless evangelical leaders have made this point clear: churches that allow women to preach are not following God’s Word but their own wisdom. These churches are not biblical. They will face consequences for going against what God has commanded.

Of course, this ideology is shifting in many Western churches, and many women are fully supported in finding their vocations outside any notion of “God’s design.” And yet a large number of churches—including the Roman Catholic Church, the largest Western church body—still affirm the beliefs that women cannot serve from the pulpit and that God has designed women and men for distinct, special roles. The reverberations of this idea are significant and can be seen in the relative absence of women in leadership roles for our parachurch organizations, our Christian institutions, our Fortune 500 companies, our government offices. Some people defend this dearth of leadership by noting that women often make the intentional choice of family over career advancement and

thus are less likely to ascend to higher ranks in any company, organization, or government. This rationale seems problematic for sure, because it reflects and reinforces a foundational belief that women are not designed to lead, that their voices are not designed to speak with authority, and that men will always do better in these roles.

In this, popular culture and Christian culture have colluded to give women and men consistent messages about who and what they are to be, solely on the basis of their gender. From an early age, we are bombarded with images everywhere about what women can do because of their “design.” When Barbie proclaims she is bad at math; when Legos “for girls” are pink and marketed as beauty salons; when parents themselves are two and a half times more likely to wonder whether their boys are gifted geniuses than their girls: when all these messages converge on us from our infancy, we are likely to believe that gender roles are inherently responsible for the ways we think, act, and even emote. In recent studies, children as young as seven associate intelligence with boys far more than with girls. Lin Bian, a psychologist at the University of Illinois, found that girls were also far more reluctant to play games meant for “really smart people.” This sense that brilliance and genius are specifically masculine traits persists into adulthood, with studies showing that a majority of men believe their intelligence is higher than it really is, whereas women rate their intelligence lower than it is in actuality. Messages about the abilities of men and women have significant consequences. Bian concludes, “In the long-term it will steer away many young women from careers that are thought to require brilliance.”<sup>5</sup>

Here’s the truth: mass media has compelled us to believe the lie that women are only good at some activities and that men

are good at an entirely different set. Christian culture has taken this ideology one step further, telling us that these differences are part of God's grand design. Images that go against this dominant narrative are lauded as edgy or as exceptions that prove the rule. The cereal commercial featuring a dad and his daughter is amazing because it shows the dad getting breakfast for his kid. Casting a woman in a role as a construction worker is amazing because it shows a woman doing something outside of what's expected. A woman assuming the helm of a Fortune 500 company is celebrated because this is so far beyond of what women normally do. Both Christian and popular culture peddle stereotypes, reinforcing our sense that women and men who step outside some kind of divinely endorsed "role" are outliers going against either what mass media expects or what God has sanctified.

So how do we find ourselves in a world where gender roles are still so deeply entrenched? I mean that question in two ways: What are we still doing here, in the twenty-first century, where women have made so many gains but have yet to find equity? How do we find ourselves in a world where, in some places, even little girls getting an education can seem like a threat? But the question also challenges us to consider how we discover our God-given gifts, as women *and* men, when our cultures tell us that our vocations, our skills, our life paths must be determined more by gender than by anything else.

Growing up, my heroes were women who pushed against gendered stereotypes, who defied barriers to their becoming fully who they want to be. I admired those women who transgressed even the smallest of gender norms, because they served as a model of possibility, letting me know that being a woman did not have to limit me. I remember well the church

camp counselors who talked about college as if it was absolutely normal for women to get an education. The women in my church, those who grasped whatever leadership roles they could, brushing against the stained glass ceilings of our religious communities. A college professor who unabashedly modeled for me what life might look like as a working mother. A graduate school administrator who stood up against a misogynistic faculty colleague on my behalf, letting him know that the leering invitations to his office were a gross misuse of power. Again and again, I've had women open a different world for me, one where we—as women with voices, minds, agency—could find ourselves.

One way we claim our God-created selves in a gendered world, then, is to be models and mentors who point to another way of operating in the workplace, in schools, and in our homes. When my kids were toddlers, I brought them to campus regularly. There were few other mothers in faculty roles on campus, and I wanted my students to see that women could be good mothers and good professionals, and that the possibility of being one did not exclude the possibility of another. Other women have similarly served as mentors to me, helping me navigate a tenure review process that seemed, at the time, more an old boys' network than an equitable path to promotion. Even as I've grown older and sometimes wondered whether having a mentor might still be necessary, I've found courage and strength from younger women, too, whose wisdom and life experience has given me direction I sometimes didn't know I needed. Some women and men, standing aside and letting me use my own voice, have helped me find courage to speak about gender injustice in my church and at my workplace.



Yes, I mean women *and* men. When we talk about gender injustice, too often it's assumed that women want to dominate men or that they want to create a society in which men get their comeuppance after centuries of domination. Perhaps there are feminists who believe this. Most of us who claim a feminist identity, however, do so because we embrace what's at the heart of feminist ideology: that we are all created equal and that we can all rise together once we destroy the systems and the ideologies that dictate one gender's superiority over another. *We all rise together*: that sensibility allows us to claim that we are all worthy, no matter one's gender.

I want to believe that if my grandparents were alive today, they might have let me drive the riding lawnmower and invited my brother inside to help Grandma with dinner. It's easy to imagine a different childhood, one where I maneuvered that Snapper mower around Grandpa's ample yard, my Dekalb hat tilted over my curly hair; given how much better of a cook my brother still is, I can easily imagine him sitting alongside Grandma, learning our family recipes. We found ourselves in a different world growing up, one that saw our gender more than our gifts or inclinations, and my childhood memories are colored by the many times my brother experienced a life I wanted for myself, but couldn't have as a girl.

That's not a world I want for my kids, for my students, for myself. I want my boys to find themselves in a different world, one where they see possibility everywhere. Fortunately, given their parents, their church environment, and their school culture, this is the case. I have hope they will believe—really believe—that they can do anything they feel called to do. Because my students' church and family cultures are often more conservative than the one I've cultivated for my family,

I know it's up to me and my colleagues to encourage young women and men to pursue vocational goals dependent not on their gender but on God's good and rich calling. I have faith in my colleagues and in our institution that this can happen, especially when we work to push back against gender stereotypes.

We all have it in our power to find ourselves in a different world, one where girls can mow the yard—or play football, or speak in church, or get an education, or find their voices. And where they will feel, truly feel, that these endeavors are not so complicated after all.