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# Raising Spiritual Kids in the Age of Instagram

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# Raising Spiritual Kids in the Age of Instagram

by Melanie Springer Mock

The call came in to our harvest-yellow kitchen when I was fourteen. I stood at the breakfast bar with my family's also-yellow phone pressed to me ear, winding and unwinding the twisted cord while listening to Tamara, my erstwhile friend. She wanted me to know I was nice enough, but that everyone in my ninth-grade class agreed I needed to get some new clothes already. And that I definitely needed to get a new hairstyle, because my short

curls were really ugly (except she used an expletive in place of "really").

Even though I laughed it off, her comment stung badly: and stung for the next four years, when Tamara and others continued to harass me, on the phone and in the classroom, for having a horrible taste in clothes, an awful haircut, and a tomboy vibe that meant I could not—no matter what I did or how I tried—be part of an in crowd.

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Adolescence was miserable for me. And yet, on most days, I thank my lucky stars that I grew up in the 1980s, when bullying took place primarily over family phone lines and on the playground and in scrawled letters written on spiral notebook paper. At least we didn't have smart phones then. We didn't have social media. We didn't have a thousand other ways that teens can tell their peers they are unworthy: of love, of attention, of a place

at the table, in the lunchroom or otherwise.

My sons, now 16 and 15, navigate a different reality than I did. Theirs is a world where worthiness is measured by likes on Instagram and streaks on Snapchat, and where friendship is formed via pixels and gigabytes more often than face-to-face relationships. Each day, my kids log into their social media accounts to see countless images of their peers, trying hard to belong.



Some of these pictures show a little too much skin; many of the pictures are sexualized, even if the sender doesn't intend them to be. My boys also post selfie after selfie, images that beg for affirmation, for an acceptance that says their hair—and their bodies—are not heinous, their clothes are not ugly, their very beings are worthy of being seen and loved.

Their complicated interaction with technology is enough to make me despair that my kids will ever grow up to be grounded people with deep, abiding faith. Sometimes, I do despair,

and, in a pique of frustration, I abscond with their phones, rail against the damaging messages of popular culture, threaten to never let them use Snapchat again. But then my desperation moderates, because I recognize that fundamentally the challenges they face are similar to ones I experienced as a teen: the medium now might be different, even though the messages are essentially the same. Knowing this, I feel

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certain it's possible for children to grow up, thrive, and become who God created them to be, even in a technological world expecting them to be someone else entirely.

Countless studies suggest that kids' use of technology is problematic. Addictions to smart phones have been likened to dependency on cocaine, and some people have blamed phone use for a significant uptick in teen suicide and mental health diagnoses over the past decade. Teens today are less likely than their predecessors to go on dates, meet friends in real life, get

their driver's permits, or find part-time jobs, in some part because they have exchanged face-to-face contact with the far more immediate, but also far more artificial, interchanges that can happen online.

Given this reality, what are parents of faith supposed to do?

Although it seems simplistic, my answer to this conundrum is this: We need to help our kids navigate technology, rather than offering draconian

restrictions that only make screens more alluring. We need to have countless conversations with them, allowing them to explore their complicated relationship to technology, as well as our own. We need to acknowledge the benefits of technology and the ways it can keep us connected, when used appropriately. And, most significantly, we need

gender, deserve exclusion. Our churches often sanctify that sense of exclusion, suggesting that unless one fits a "biblical" paradigm, she or he has no business sitting in the Sunday morning pews. Our language codifies exclusion, the very words we use deciding who we consider worthy or not simply by how they are described, the labels we give them. And



to let them know they are worthy people, just as they are, whether they get a million likes on Instagram—or none at all.

This message of worthiness is not one our children often hear, in social media and otherwise. Instead, they are assailed by a culture that endorses the idea that some people are more worthy than others: one that says that those who live on the margins, because of ability, ethnicity, race, sexuality, or

the narratives we value most remind us who really matters in our culture, especially those who have privilege and power.

Imagine what a world might look like where children know—really know—that they are fearfully, wonderfully made, just as they are. That we, and their churches, and their communities, don't expect them to change into some ideal we've created, about what it means to be a perfect son or daughter, a perfect teen, a



perfect Christian. Because if we really believe the Psalmist, who rejoices in our unique creation, knit together in our mothers' wombs, we will try to foster in our children a deep respect for who they are as individual image-bearers of God. We will also remind them that it is not the powerful or popular to whom Jesus turns, but those who walk in society's margins and with society's marginalized.

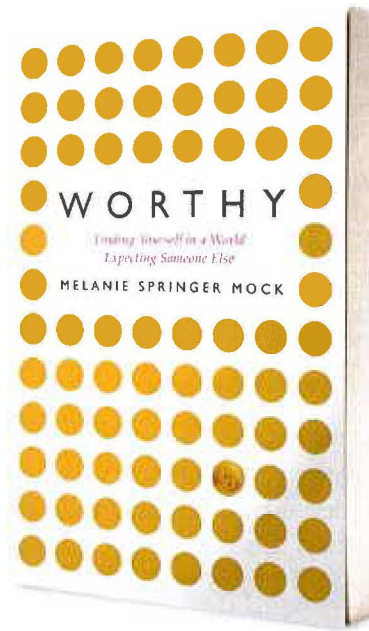
Raising spiritual kids in an age of Instagram is daunting, to be sure. As technology continues to change, we will also face new challenges that may well undermine our best efforts to nurture a new generation into adulthood. But rather than continually banishing technology from our homes and our kids' hot little

hands, we need to develop tools that will assist us in navigating a technological future that none of us understand well. And those tools must include an assurance that our presence on social media, the number of our friends, our achievements, our appearance does not define us.

Helping our kids—and ourselves—become grounded in our faith means accepting with confidence the belief that we are all of us worthy of love, just as we are, simply because we are created in the very image of God. And that assurance can help us contend with the many problematic messages technology conveys: either through a smart phone, or one that is harvest yellow and still connected to the wall.



Melanie Springer Mock is Professor of English at George Fox University, Newberg, OR. In 2009, she won the GFU Undergraduate Faculty of the Year award and in 2015, she won the GFU Undergraduate Scholar of the Year award. She is the author or co-author of five books, including most recently, *Worthy: Finding Yourself in a World Expecting Someone Else* (Herald Press, April 2018). Her essays and reviews have appeared in *The Nation*, *Christian Feminism Today*, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, *Christianity Today*, and *Mennonite World Review*.



*Who do you think you are?  
Be who God created you to be.*

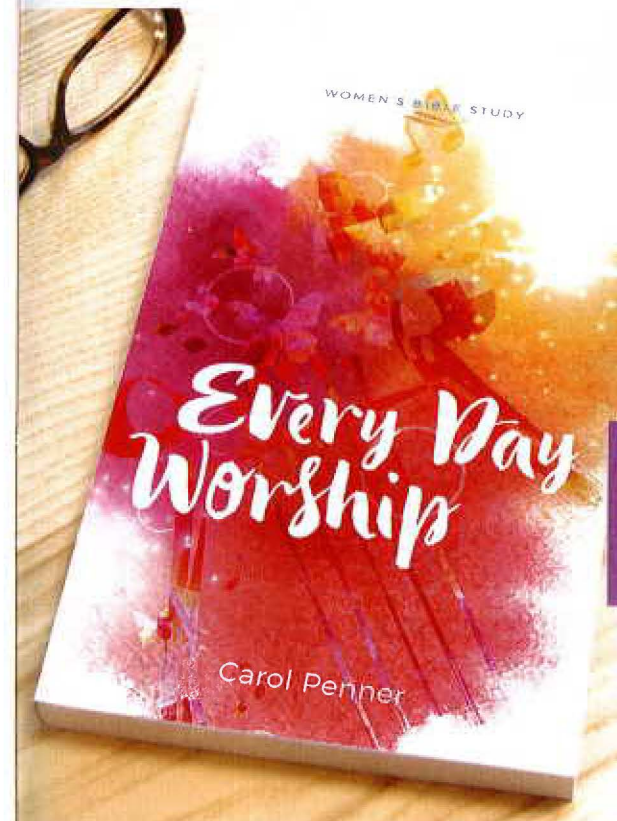
*Worn out from squeezing into a  
mold that doesn't fit? Step away from  
expectations and toward God's heart.*

# WORTHY

*Finding Yourself in a World  
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