

LEARNING
TO LISTEN,
RECLAIMING
OUR VOICE

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GOD'S ORDER

*Because you are women, people will force their thinking on you,
their boundaries on you. They will tell you how to dress,
how to behave, who you can meet and where you can go.
Don't live in the shadows of people's judgment.*

AMITABH BACHCHAN

THE DRIVE INTO TOWN wove through green rolling hills and along a beautiful, peaceful coast. Calm sapphire waters lapped the white seashores, while waves of green grass swayed in the breeze on the hills beyond the shore. The sun was out, and it felt like a summer day with the first hint of autumn.

As I breathed in the fresh sea air I felt closer to God. It seemed like all of my decisions, poor and otherwise, had led me to this little Irish town of Greystones nestled along the coast.

There were about twenty of us, and as we got off the bus we all wore the same dopey grin. We couldn't believe we were there at last. After months of preparation—the support letters, the fundraising events, the training camps, the selling of precious belongings, the goodbyes—we were there. It was day one of the World Race, and we were about to

spend the next eleven months traveling to eleven different countries in an attempt to serve others. I was not yet aware of the problematic elements that came with the way the evangelical church often did missions, but over time I would learn.

My possessions for the next year were packed in a bulging backpack that I struggled to carry as we made our way down the hill to the house we would call home.

We were prepared for this—at least we thought we were. Several months earlier our squad of fifty-five had gathered in the Georgia woods for what was known as “training camp”: seven days of intense team-building and attempting to hear God’s voice, sleeping under tarps, and eating unfamiliar food. This was designed to prepare us for sleeping on floors, teaching English, partnering with nongovernmental organizations, giving sermons, and a host of other tasks.

Before training camp we had undergone the interview process: talking to a complete stranger about our deepest wounds and how we’d grown from them, praying that our past wouldn’t disqualify us from what could be our future.



I grew up in a conservative evangelical church. I was very young when I accepted Jesus into my heart and around nine when I chose to be baptized. Around the age of thirteen, at a conference, I had an experience with God that I can only describe as the baptism of the Holy Spirit, though I didn’t realize it until I was in my early twenties. I was dedicated and involved in my youth group throughout high school, going on mission trips to Mexico and Costa Rica.

In college I fell in love with a ministry called Annex at the University of Colorado Boulder, which profoundly shaped my faith. With them I went on a mission trip to Thailand, where I had another spiritual experience that brought me closer to God than I had ever been before. After that I decided to dedicate my life to serving God in any capacity.

I led mission trips on my summer breaks from college, and after I graduated from college a year early, I spent six months at a Youth With a Mission Bible school in Australia. I had been back for less than a year when I decided to go on the World Race.

My life had been infused with the church and missions and God ever since I could remember, and unlike many, I didn't have a phase when I partied or rebelled. I was perfectionistic and rigid because I found my sense of belonging and worthiness within the church. I had witnessed how the evangelical church treated people who made mistakes, and I was terrified of making one. When I applied to go on the World Race, my faith and my church community were everything to me.

I was perfectionistic and rigid because I found my sense of belonging and worthiness within the church.

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Before I left for the Race, my life had taken on a terrible monotony that I couldn't stand. Every day felt the same: waking up early to go to a job where I counted other people's money as a bank teller.

"And how would you like your change?" I'd ask, a big, fake smile plastered on my face.

"In dollars." Cue laughter.

"Ha-ha! Good one! But I mean in what bills would you like your change?"

They would sober up and say, "Tens and fives."

The joke wasn't funny the first time I heard it, and it amazed me how many times it was told. How could such a bad joke gain such traction?

I was making the best money I ever had at the ripe age of twenty-three. But even with the opportunity to be promoted and earn more, I just couldn't stand banking. What made it worse was the older married men who told me what they thought of my body or my looks. This is how one such interaction went:

“Good morning. How are you today?” I said in the same chipper voice I used with every customer who approached my desk.

Before speaking he looked up and down my body as if I were wearing nothing, as if he could see through my usual outfit: a frumpy cardigan, business pants, and orthopedic shoes.

“Well, aren’t you the sexiest teller here?” he said.

Waves of discomfort, fear, and anger rolled through me. I was pretty sure I was being sexually harassed. I knew the bank had a policy, and if I reported this guy, they would close his account. But I was afraid to say anything, thinking, *That would just make a big deal out of nothing, right? Would he get angry and lash out? Would he follow me after work? Would he call me names?* I’d had men do all of these things in the past when I resisted their advances.

I quickly made a mental calculation of my options and what I could do to keep peace. I decided to ignore the comment because that had always been the most effective option. I would not appease him and invite more unwelcome comments, but I also would not fight him, inciting his anger and making a “big deal” out of the situation.

All of this calculating was done in a flash. I smiled and repeated the question: “How may I help you, sir?”

He eyed me as if offended that I hadn’t thanked him for his comment. Then he said, “Whoa, whoa, not so fast, Missy. I’m giving you a compliment.”

But it wasn’t a compliment; it was objectification. He knew better, I’m sure, and he was showing me what he could get away with. He was showing me who had power, daring me to report him.

Whether it was the pastor who asked me to sit in his lap, the stranger who groped me in a pool, or this bank customer standing in front of me, all were sending me messages about who had power and who didn’t. Their actions were communicating ownership; they saw my body as an object to regulate, control, consume. In their view, the rights to my body were theirs, not my own.

But I couldn't articulate any of this in the moment. I took a deep breath as I eyed the wedding ring on his finger, the wrinkles on his face, and his receding hairline. He had to have been at least thirty years older than me, and he probably had a long life of getting his way.

So I swallowed the feeling that told me to report him and smiled. "Thank you. Now, how can I help you today?"

When the transaction was over and he left, I excused myself to use the bathroom. I locked myself in a stall and tried to calm my jangled nerves. I wished there were men on the teller line because maybe their presence would protect me from these unwanted advances. For some reason, men don't invade the space of other men. And I thought perhaps if I were within that space, I would be safe.



I suppose it was partly the monotony of my job and the exhaustion of dealing with these types of men that made me want to drop everything and leave for eleven months. But it was also more than that. It was the call of adventure, the idea that my life could be more than what society told me as a woman it could be. I thought that going on a grand journey would break me free of the expectations thrust on me as a woman. I didn't realize that it would also wake me up to my enormous privilege.

My decision to go on the World Race was also about proving something to myself: that I was good—not just good on the surface but intrinsically good. The church had taught me that missions was the ultimate form of "goodness," which explained all of the missions I had done in the past. I didn't realize it at the time, but all my work in missions was an unconscious quest to see myself as worthy.

Somehow, I had picked up the idea that I was bad, despite my perfect grades and goody-two-shoes reputation. Despite the fact that

I had the idea that my life could be more than what society told me as a woman it could be.

I began every morning with prayer, Bible reading, and journaling. Yet no matter what I did, no matter the rules I upheld and followed, I was terrified that my soul was broken. Uniquely broken. Irredeemable. I constantly questioned my salvation.

I'd been led to believe that people were terrible and Jesus made us kind of okay. This theology of total depravity caused a lot of harm in my relationship with God, myself, and others. My worst fear was that nothing could help me, not even Jesus. Though I tried desperately, I couldn't be like Jesus every moment of the day. People around me always prayed, "Less of me, more of God," but I couldn't ever empty myself of *me*. I still had thoughts, opinions, desires, and gut reactions. No matter how hard I tried to squash them when they didn't fit that narrative, they popped up again, like a beach ball held underwater. I feared this was simply evidence that I was irredeemable.



While growing up in the church in nineties America, I got mixed messages about womanhood. Magazines told me it only mattered what I looked like. I should get slim by dieting and I should stop eating for pleasure. Guys liked smooth-skinned, skinny girls with long hair, so that's what I should be. Some magazines said all that mattered was pleasing men sexually.

Conversely, the church told me to cover up every part of my body that showed I was becoming a woman. I was supposed to protect men from my sexuality and not be a stumbling block because "modest is hottest." Church lessons on modesty centered on comparing girls to objects. A girl was an unwrapped lollipop until she did something sexual; then she was a licked sucker that no one wanted. Women were objects to consume, and men didn't want women who had been tasted.

Such messaging to girls from both the church and society boiled down to the same thing: his needs and his wants—not

yours. Your body is for him to consume, and if he takes without asking, it's probably your fault for not covering up. Women are responsible for men's sexual actions, so do what you can to make his life easier and more pleasurable.

In the church there were two types of women: Jezebels and submissive housewives. And as I understood it, submission meant deference to men in everything. Men knew better because they were the spiritual leaders. If you believed something that didn't fit what the men had told you in your life, you were in sin or rebellious.

Being a naturally outspoken, inquisitive, and opinionated girl got me in trouble—a lot. I was told not to ask questions but to have faith that what I'd been taught was the absolute truth. I didn't want to have a Jezebel spirit or go to hell, so I shrank back into myself and covered my body, hoping to be found good in others' eyes.

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“Meghan! Meghan! How do you not see that dog?”

My teammates knew I loved dogs. But I was so lost in my thoughts I hadn't noticed the spaniel running around with a ball in front of the big, beautiful white house. It had dropped the ball at my feet. Behind it was the family we would be serving for the next month.

They seemed so put together. My first thought was the Brady Bunch, minus the six kids. They led us into the house and showed us the rooms where we would be sleeping. Seven girls and I filled the main bedroom, with its beautiful king-size canopy bed and gorgeous windows. As soon as we set down our stuff, we went back downstairs for dinner, where we celebrated a teammate's birthday. As we sang happy birthday to her and they played an old piano, sunlight poured in through the windows.

It was easy to forget that we were on a mission trip—that we were there to serve our hosts and their church. Their welcome was so warm, it stung only a little bit when we found out that our ministry that month would be handing out tracts and doing housework for

them. I wasn't a fan of tracts. In my experience, a desire to commit to God didn't come through a fear of hell.

When a couple of team members voiced their apprehension, our host said tracts could teach people about God. I nodded along and swallowed my distaste, as I had been taught that "good girls" do. What I thought of his plan was insignificant, as he was the leader, and I was the follower. As he discussed our schedule, he also told us about the church, suggesting that we women wear head coverings if we wanted to. Because of the foreign nature of what he was suggesting and the fact that he was giving us a choice, most of us promptly dismissed any notion of wearing a head covering.

It was late by the time we got out of orientation that night, and after traveling all day, we were thinking of bed, dragging our sleepy selves up the stairs.



During breakfast the next morning my teammates and I discussed the day's events. Many of us felt uneasy about the tracts. But after talking it over, we reasoned that we would do it, that God could use anything to draw people to himself. We thought that if they just saw God through the tracts, they would see goodness. We also were there to serve our hosts, who had been so kind in welcoming us. If they wanted us to hand out tracts, then hand out tracts we would.

Our small pep talk to ourselves worked. Soon we were loading into the van and heading into the city with boxes and boxes of tracts buckled into the seats next to us.

As casually as I could, I pulled one out of the box and began to read it. My heart sank. It said,

Welcome to the Olympics in Great Britain! You are here to support your country and her athletes. It is your hope and

desire that they take home as many medals as possible! This is the “Ultimate Goal.”

But let us tell you of an even more important “goal” that you should have. That is, the “goal” of being declared a righteous follower of the ONE TRUE GOD, and thus assured of an eternal home in heaven someday when you die!

It is written in GOD’S Word the Bible, “There is none righteous, no not one, for all have sinned and come short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:10, 23). But it need not be that way!

For it is written, “God demonstrates his love towards us in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8). . . .

The ONE TRUE GOD has provided the only way that you and I can be totally forgiven for all our sins. That way is through his son, JESUS CHRIST! For it is written, “that if you will confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus . . . you shall be saved” (Romans 10:9, 13).

Please consider that this salvation from sin cannot be purchased or earned by you and me. God’s true salvation is a totally free gift! (Ephesians 2:8-9)

If truly “saved,” the evidence will be a changed life, turning from sin (2 Corinthians 5:17). So call on the Lord now, and heaven will be your “Ultimate Goal.”

I couldn’t keep my eyes from rolling. First off, we were not in Great Britain; we were in Ireland. And the unsuspecting people on the streets and in their homes were most certainly not at the Olympics, which wouldn’t start for several weeks—in London.

But even more than that, can you imagine being out running errands when—*wham*—a young American corners you and hands you a tract like that? It felt like we were being sent out to prove true all the stereotypes about pushy and ignorant Americans. Even if the tract had contained the correct information, I didn’t see how a piece of

paper saying you had to believe in Jesus to go to heaven could do any justice to God.



As soon as the van dropped us off in a random neighborhood, my team and I began to talk about how uncomfortable we felt after reading the tracts. In the end, we halfheartedly decided to do what we were told and split into teams of two to go door to door.

When we knocked on doors, most people were kind and accommodating. But some couldn't suppress their laughter when they read the tract. "You do know where you are, right? The Olympics aren't being held here."

Dying inside, we would respond with something like, "Oh yeah, we know that but . . ." Then we launched into the story of the World Race and how that was what we'd been asked to do, so we were trying to be respectful.

They were always much more interested in the story of the World Race than in what the tract said. Most people we talked to said they were Christians, so it didn't take long for us to stuff our tiny booklets in our bags and start asking people if they needed prayer. If no one was home, we hung several tracts on the door handle so we could get rid of them as fast as possible. A couple of times we were invited in for tea, and I fell in love with the Irish people, their humor, and how forgiving they were of our ridiculous little booklets.

When we returned from ministry, my teammates and I discarded the rest of the tracts by stuffing them into each other's socks, packs, Bibles, journals, shoes, and more.

The next time we went out to deliver leaflets, it was to the little coastal city of Dún Laoghaire. Because we were so mesmerized by the sights and sounds, we were even less apt to hand out tracts as they made us look like tourists who'd gotten on the wrong plane. We talked to people, learned about their families, and asked them if they needed prayer. As for the tracts, we went to stores and

restaurants and asked if we could leave them there. Clerks often said something like, "I think so," and we dumped as many off as possible. When the van came back to pick us up, we didn't talk about where the tracts went.

And so went the first week of Ireland: "handing out tracts" interspersed with cleaning out garages and weeding for the family who was hosting us.



When Sunday came, most of us were thankful to sit for a day, even if it was in a conservative church service. That Sunday morning, one of the girls wrapped a scarf around her head, reminding us that our contact had asked us to consider wearing coverings. A few of us considered putting one on, but ultimately decided not to because we didn't really know what *head covering* meant. Ultimately, many of us reminded ourselves that it was optional and decided not to wear one.

Of the approximately fifteen girls who went to church that morning, only two chose to wear head coverings. But when we got to church some of us began to regret it because many women in the congregation were wearing them. Still, the church welcomed us warmly, so we assumed that it wasn't too important.

That night our contact wanted to have a meeting and by the way he requested it, it seemed we were in trouble. We speculated about what the problem could be: Perhaps he had found out we weren't really handing out tracts. Or maybe he had found out we had pranked one another with them. We couldn't think of anything else we had done wrong, so we walked into the room prepared to explain why we had chosen not to give out the tracts.

But he began by asking why most of us hadn't worn head coverings at church. Finding this odd, we reminded him that he had told us it was optional. His face grew red and he shook his head, saying, "It's unbiblical for women not to wear head coverings in God's house

because it is only when women wear head coverings that they can be pure in God's sight."

When some of us shared our own understanding of those Bible verses on head coverings, he interrupted and launched into a talk about "God's order"—that is, God created woman to be ruled over by man. He said women were to submit, to be quiet, and to cover themselves fully because their bodies were a source of lust. One of the lines he kept repeating was, "Men should worship audibly in the church, while women should be inaudible."

When one of us asked about the women who sang at church, he explained that women could sing and share testimony. But any time a man could possibly be learning from a woman, "God's order" would be upset. God's order was for women to be subordinate and to add "beauty" to a space. Should a woman teach, preach, or speak, she was upsetting God's order. And when God's order was upset, bad things happened.

As he continued, he got more and more heated—and more disparaging of women. It became clear that he viewed women as children to be taken care of or bossed about, unable to lead or even to take care of themselves.

Many of the women in our group grew increasingly silent as he continued, until one of our male teammates, Ryan, stood up and defended us. That's when the cruelty of our host's words really hit us. Some of us began to cry. As the discussion grew more intense, Ryan told us we didn't have to endure such talk anymore and about five of us took that as our cue and left.

We gathered outside in the cool night, some fighting back tears, others angry. Our contact's dehumanizing words made us feel *lesser*, as if our only role in the church was to submit and stay quiet. And, truly, that's exactly what he said. It was even more frustrating that the women who questioned him were dismissed, and it took a man to stand up for us. In our small group, we realized that all of us had

endured such treatment—we wondered if it wouldn't hurt so much if it hadn't happened before.



I was raised in a church that professed similar things, and I had always struggled with it. I was still working out if this is what being a “godly woman” truly meant. In some horrible way, the place that brought me comfort and led me to God was the same place holding me back.

When I was thirteen I went on my very first mission trip to Mexico. I was in my awkward middle school stage, and I had two different shirts with me that felt like home. One was a faded, light-blue Roxy crewneck T-shirt (the coolest in the early 2000s) with a small hole in the armpit from overuse. There was something strangely comforting about that shirt; as my body changed and my inner life changed, it was there for me. So, of course, I brought it on this trip to a strange new place.

I was still working out what being a “godly woman” truly meant.

My youth pastor didn't like it. When I raised my hands, my lower stomach showed. He said the shirt was inappropriate, that I would cause men and boys to stumble. I was thirteen and just beginning to understand that people in my church viewed women's bodies as dangerous. I had been taught that my growing body caused men to do bad things or to feel bad things, so it was right to cover it as much as possible. To be a good Christian girl, I had to hide my body at all costs so the men around me wouldn't be tempted to act on their sexual desires.

This filled me with shame. My body was somehow gravely wrong just because it existed. I wasn't told to change my shirt as a way to respect myself; I was told I could be a distraction to boys. This told me that my body was not there for me, but for the viewing of men.

While the church told me to cover up, just about every other facet of society told me that only through my beauty could I have worth. I needed to be beautiful so boys would notice me. I needed to be attractive to make friends and to succeed. I was to dress in a way that made me attractive—just not *too* attractive. The need to be accepted by my peers battled with my desire to be holy and cover everything up with oversized clothing. It was incredibly confusing.

Of course, I listened to my youth pastor and changed my shirt, and I wore nothing but baggy gym clothes for the rest of the trip. But that didn't prevent what happened next.

Later that week we were walking down a crowded street after lunch, and I lagged behind the group to pet a stray dog. I stooped down to scratch his ears, but as I stood up an older man walking by aggressively grabbed my chest. He looked ahead and smiled as he twisted my young breast in his hand, as if he was getting pleasure out of food before spitting it out.

He was gone before I could register what had happened. I stood there in shock, feeling like I might vomit and wanting to cry. When I noticed that my group was a good bit ahead of me by now, I swallowed the bile in my throat and jogged to catch up to the group, trying to conceal my shaking hands. They didn't notice anything, and I wasn't sure how I felt about that. On one hand I was glad that they hadn't witnessed me suddenly becoming a licked lollipop, but on the other hand I was desperate for someone to hold me as I cried and tell me that it wasn't my fault.

Hadn't I been warned about this? Hadn't I been told that my body was a temptation to men and would cause men to do bad things? I thought there must have been something about my shirt that caused that man to do that. It had to have been my fault in some way and because it was my fault, I had become dirty. I could not let anyone know the shame that I had brought on myself. So I stayed silent.

I didn't know why that memory came to the surface about ten years later from a reprimand on not wearing head coverings. But arise it did, but this time, I didn't feel shame. I felt anger. We were to cover our heads because we were impure otherwise. Unworthy. Less than. A temptation. Women were impure based only on how we dressed, not on the content of our character.

But I wasn't so easily fooled this time. I knew what verses our host was referencing in the Bible. I had read commentary from biblical scholars and knew that my host's understanding of the passage was shallow at best. There were plenty of other instances in the Bible in which women prayed and prophesied without mention of a head covering.

Why did men want to control what women wore? Why had I been going to the pool fully clothed for every youth event while young men could wear whatever they wanted? I had realized by then that it didn't make a difference what a woman wore if she was sexually harassed or assaulted. There was only one thing that made me vulnerable to sexual assault or harassment, and it was something I had no control over. I was a woman.

That night after being disparaged by our host I felt small, demeaned, violated, and confused. And in that huddled small group of women, I felt something else too. In their common pain and struggle, I felt empowered.

We were done being told that we were "lesser than" by the institution meant to bring freedom, and we were going to do something about it. We just didn't know what yet.