

LEADING LADIES UNEDITED SAMPLE—NOT FOR EXCERPT OR REDISTRIBUTION.
PROPERTY OF BOLD VISION BOOKS

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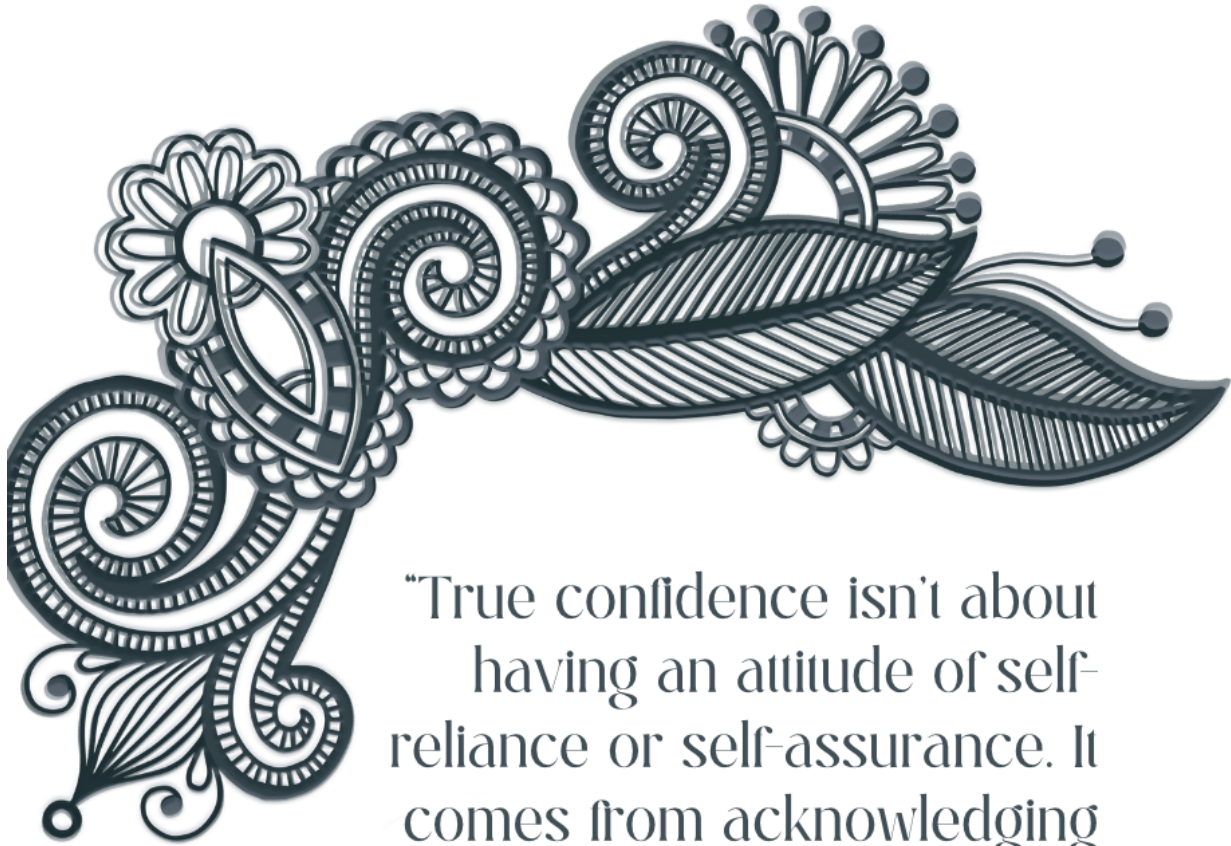
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“True confidence isn’t about having an attitude of self-reliance or self-assurance. It comes from acknowledging that there is purpose where God has you in life right now. It’s also in your obedience to trust Him and move you forward in life every step of the way...”

-Tosca Lee

NY Times Bestselling Author
& Former Miss Nebraska

Chapter 1

Amber Weigand-Buckley—Take off the Makeup



Multi-award-winning editor and art director of Leading Hearts magazine Amber Weigand-Buckley (barefacedgirl.com) faces mental health challenges daily with a hefty dose of self-awareness, self-care, professional psychiatric guidance, and medication, reinforced with pit-bull perseverance and a lot of Jesus-filled grace.

However, she never dreamed that a severe bipolar episode and the walk from shame to authentic healing would open the door for God to grow her in leadership—beyond what she could have imagined. As the owner of

#barefacedcreativemedia and marketing director for the Advanced Writers and Speakers Association, Amber has the privilege of helping world-changing women find their wings, hone their skills, and take their God-calling to the next level.

"Hi, my name is Amber. I'm a bipolar woman, and I am a leader." Sometimes when I say those words, I feel like I just arrived at my first AA meeting.

I'm not a healed bipolar or a recovered bipolar. I take medication daily and navigate life differently. My family knows that bipolar disorder is a part of my DNA. But I still have faith, and I still believe in miracles. I love God, and I love that I'm one of many, just like you, called to lead in a unique way. It took me a while to feel qualified to lead again, but that wasn't because God magically changed my brain chemistry. It came in knowing that God uses all of my divinely

created beauty and steps into my weaknesses so I might lead others to a fuller knowledge of Him.

I'm part of a sisterhood; I'd call it a humankind-hood. Like many on this round planet, I face the challenge of keeping life focused while battling a bunch of brain activity that doesn't like to play nice. Sometimes my thoughts move so fast it's hard to tie them down, and I get depressed or anxiety ridden when I can't keep up. If I can do anything with my journey, it's to give the world a greater understanding of what the face of mental illness looks like and how it looks a lot like me. It took a long time for me to realize that this condition does not disqualify me from God's leadership call on my life.

Going Barefaced

I didn't realize I was having a breakdown when it happened. On the surface, I was 38, an editor for an award-winning Christian youth magazine, a credentialed minister with the same organization I worked for, and a quirky, flower-child creative who wanted to challenge teens and stretch the Church. Down deeper, I had secrets. A childhood with a “don't talk about the abusive atmosphere in your home, or your dad might lose his job in his Christian workplace” dynamic. I couldn't believe that in adulthood I'd let the dysfunctional home life I left behind seep into 19 years of marriage with similarly toxic patterns.

Writing was my therapy. Call me hypocritical, but some of the articles that I wrote were, in reality, me talking to myself in the pit—working out what I knew was wrong, but at the same time trying to maintain the appearance needed to stay in a circle of leadership. After all, it seemed a sin to know something was wrong in private and not do anything about it publicly.

I *desperately* wanted change. I wanted to rip off the mask and find deep healing. As I tried to cope by seeking God and counsel, everything in my brain became an open fire hydrant.

My writing, self-therapy, and journaling soon turned into six months when words wouldn't stop invading my sleep. At all times I had a pen in my possession. I would write on anything I could get my hands on, even my own body. I spent my nights writing, my afternoons writing, and I would pull into parking lots and write. I was even exhausting my toilet-time writing. At the time, I saw something quite beautiful in those moments. It was a time of stripping off my makeup to deal with the real dirt of my humanity. It felt like God's grace and love shed light on who I was—a barefaced girl. Even now, I wonder, *Is this how Edgar Allen Poe or Emily Dickinson descended into madness?* Everything *meant* something just for me, and the rest of the world was just clueless.

Some moments seemed euphoric and beautiful, while others were the darkest feelings I'd ever had. My writings unraveled light, goodness, and darkness until it became a tangled knot. I let people into my headspace who never should have been there. I was disillusioned into thinking things could never be made right. The darkness, regret, and hopelessness were so thick I didn't think I would ever find good again. Or that I ever would have the possibility of being more than "damaged goods," meaning I was unfit for ministry. Before anyone could find out what was truly going on inside my head, I let go of my ministerial license—I was unfit to hold any “called by God” titles.

The pit got darker, and then the enemy handed me a shovel while I was down there. I made choices I told myself I would never make, choices I thought justifiable. I would volley between anger and wanting to make things right. I would apologize repeatedly to God, wanting the feelings I stumbled over and my destructive behavior to be removed from me. All the while, my husband was doing *everything* he could for all the right reasons—allowing his own character to be revealed in repentance and seeking to care for me. Frankly, I just wanted him to pay for my

pain and I wanted to give him a reason to walk away. But God in His redemptive nature had a different plan. He allowed the one who hurt me the most deeply to bring comfort and quiet to my head when all I could feel was lonely and dark.

Pause & Reflect

What are some of the secrets that may be holding you hostage? How have you sought to deal with them? Who are your most trusted friends, the ones you can confide in on your journey to deep healing? Have you considered the need for professional intervention? Why or why not?

From the Edge

I remember the day that darkness tried to put a stake in my head. I had just finished teaching a room full of Christian writers about creatively reaching the millennial generation with a gospel that sticks. An hour later, I found myself standing alone on the edge of a mountain in Colorado. A voice speaking from the darkness I had been internalizing said, "If your life matters, if the good outweighs the shadows in your soul, God will save you if you step off this cliff." I remember contemplating, looking at the space in front of my toes and then down hundreds of feet. In those moments a familiar and loving voice broke through: "Daughter, you need to recognize my voice and turn around." And I stepped back.

All along this path, God was knocking on my door. He was doing everything He could to pursue me, and He was never going to let this injured sheep go without a fight. Months following this episode, I experienced prolonged physical illness in my body, coupled with seeing and hearing things that weren't there. Extreme emotional highs one moment swinging to exhausting lows the next. It was like every emotion in my body was attacking me at once—even the good ones.

My husband and I, fortunately, had an appointment with our counselor. It was then that I decided to take the counselor's advice and go to the hospital. In the back of my mind, I believed professionals at the hospital would prove me to be rational. That time behind a psychiatric ward door would end up being my biggest blessing in disguise; it was like God pushed a divine PAUSE button in my life.

Pause & Reflect

Recall a time, regarding unresolved hurt, when God brought things to a pause. What are some of the greatest hurdles you dealt with? How can you be proactive in keeping your personal, mental, relational, and spiritual health in focus?

Surviving My Head-In Collision

When my brain broke, I thought that was the end. My life as a writer and leader for Christ was over. It was hard to speak, and I barely had the presence of mind to drive. I had a massive head injury. I never thought I'd ever put a sentence together again. At times, I would physically touch my skull to reassure myself that my brains weren't visible through my hair. My husband and daughters were patient and picked up the slack as if I was recovering from a massive car accident. God took that time to help me recover from this tsunami that slammed my life. It took almost a year before I fully recovered my ability to write.

The “B-Word” [bahy-poh-ler]

I'm not going to lie. When I received my diagnosis of Bipolar Type 2 with psychotic episodes, I felt that I was handed a "cone of shame." As a leader, I was ashamed that I had come unglued in front of people I loved, desired respect from, and had the responsibility to encourage. I was supposed to be a role model leading others to the goodness of God. I wallowed in the toxic mess of my mind and allowed negative influencers to justify and affirm my unhealthy shift.

Although the pit diagnosis seemed to be a life sentence, with time I learned that it wasn't my God-ordained dwelling place. It was time to give up the cone of shame. It was time to be barefaced, honest, and transparent concerning my condition. Moreover, God wanted to use my voice to dissolve the stigma of the b-word.

Pause & Reflect

Are there situations you've dealt with secretly in the past, or, are currently walking through? Do you feel it disqualifies you for leadership? What intentional steps can you make to find true freedom and honesty as a leader?

We Walk, But We Never Walk Alone

I walk this journey with stigma and stereotypes. I've learned that if I want to be transparent about what I have walked through, I have to learn to be comfortable with those who are uncomfortable with my vulnerability.

Every day I wonder at the scars and symptoms—black holes of memory loss from that time. I believe that's the grace of God. You don't need reminding of "what you've done." Yes, I take medicine to relieve symptoms. But God certainly knows that I never want to be that toxically sick again.

I had to realize my call to lead—all the good, the bad, the ugly, and everything in between—is crowned with vision from Genesis 50:20: "You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives" (NIV).

I haven't seen a rainbow of promise that I will never relapse; I know it could happen. But if it does, I pray the Church will be gracious, just like my Savior who dishes grace lavishly on my Spirit-breathed dirt and bones. And even if it should happen again, my rainbow of promise is

that God will always walk with me. He is present even in our crazy, and He hangs out in our pits of personal despair.

I've realized as a leader that my hedge of influencers must be women who speak life into me for the good of my spirit. Not everyone needs to know your deepest failures or details. You just need a select few on your ride-or-die team. And if you haven't found them yet, I can guarantee your walking through shame, hurt, and pain will quickly reveal who your true friends are.

This path of brokenness has taught me a powerful truth: striving for perfection does not serve me. Covering up my flawed dirt does not make me stronger. I've not come here to build flimsy, out-of-reach polished platforms. I'm a 2 Corinthians 12:9 influencer:

"My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness. Therefore, I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me" (NIV).

In this journey, as with any illness, I've also learned that you can't traverse it in your own determination to "be well." In fact, the healthiest thing you can do is to step back from shame and realize that you need help. Without help, the darkness only becomes darker and more powerful. No matter who you are or what position of influence you hold, there is great freedom in simply taking a deep breath and courageously stepping forward to find healing. It takes getting to this place to deal more efficiently with day-to-day challenges.

Personally, it's amazing to see the richness God has revealed through my journey. Writing is not simply something I do. Now, I've learned to write from a place of vulnerability which has been pressed from the depth of who I am.

This journey has taken me from smoke-and-mirrors prestige to a place of barefaced influence, and for that I am grateful. I am actively praying for those of you who deal with mental health struggles. I ask God to allow you to know that He has called you to lead—that you have something beautifully unique to give the world for His glory.

Leading in Prayer

Heavenly Father, Thank you for taking all that we have—even what the world says is broken and useless—and repurposing it for Your glory. Help me lay everything at Your feet, especially things that appear shameful. Help me realize that I don't need to carry them alone secretly. Take away the fear of judgment, empowering me to reach out and experience freedom in Your restoring power. Help me learn to love myself the way You love me and wear the mantle of leadership in the way You've uniquely designed for me. Amen

Chapter 22

Jacquelyn Marushka—Be the Light that Ignites Others



Jacquelyn Marushka, with over 30 years experience in brand development and public relations, guides and coaches clients to advance their careers and dreams. Marushka Media (established 2016), the first Latina-owned PR and Branding agency in Nashville, Tennessee, specializes in music, film, television, and live events.

“Jackie” moved to Nashville in 1995 and became the youngest vice president of Public Relations and Communications in the Sony Music Entertainment system, responsible for 40+ recording artists across five

record labels, publishing, film, and overseeing internal and external corporate communications.

In 2013 Jacquelyn launched the Nashville office for a Brooklyn-based PR firm (representing Bruce Springsteen, Lana Del Rey, Chance the Rapper, Elvis Costello, and more). In three years, the business outgrew her kitchen office to accommodate 15 clients and 3 full-time staff.

Led by a passion to help others, dedicated to living life rooted in gratitude and possibility, she runs a fitness program and serves the local at-risk community.

Mom: The Original Wonder Woman

Growing up in the small farming community of Velarde, New Mexico, the star-filled skies taught me to dream big. The snake-filled mountains taught me to be present and alert. The flavor and color of our green chile and apple orchard harvest fed my love of light and story. My original hero, or shero, was my mom, Evelyn.

Every day the alarm clock went off at 5 am. I could hear it through our thin trailer walls. BUZZ. BUZZ. BUZZ. Like a loud goose honking as it flew overhead. But the noise never lasted long. Mom was up like lightning—no snooze button for her. Throughout my childhood, I never remember Mom going to bed or waking up. I sometimes wondered if she slept.

The shower knobs squeaked the water on and ran for several minutes. The water squeaked off and was followed by the “whirrrrrr” of Mom’s purple mini-Conair hair dryer. Mom never allowed us to go outside with our hair wet — she said we’d catch a cold, so she led by example and made time to dry her shoulder-length, dark hair. Her soft dark waves parted down the middle framing her face and highlighting her smiling brown eyes.

She turned the brass deadbolt on our heavy rough-lumber door that dad built from reclaimed wood and walked out to start her olive green 1974 Ford Fairlane station wagon with the wood paneling. Northern New Mexico gets cold in the wintertime. The skies are clear and bright blue, but the winter winds can cut through you like an ice saber.

Mom always warmed up the car, so it was toasty when we got in. She woke my sister and me as the heater cozied up the green vinyl seats. As we got dressed, brushed our teeth, and combed our hair. Mom packed paper bags with snacks—not just for us, but for kids whose parents she knew couldn’t make them lunch.

This is mom’s nature. “Did you bring enough for everyone?” was part of her thought process. “Never let anyone feel left out. Be welcoming, be kind, always share what you have; and don’t worry if you’ll have enough, God will provide for you,” she’d say. Her teacher’s desk had a drawer where she kept peanut butter crackers, peanuts, and “cheese and cracker” packs. When she shared snacks or full lunches, the food always came with wisdom and kind words of encouragement. Many of the kids she had in her classes didn’t have love at home, and she did

what she could to ensure each child knew they were important, capable, and worth investing in. She made them feel seen by tutoring in math or reading or shooting baskets for basketball to help them feel included. One year she volunteered to be our elementary school basketball coach. She didn't do this for herself or to be "mom of the year" in anyone's eyes. She does this because kids matter to her. People matter to her. Now more than 40 years later, having retired as superintendent of a school system, she still makes the most of every day and helps everyone from the youth she teaches at a small Christian school to her neighbors and of course, her family.

Pause & Reflect

Is there a person in your life that mindfully helped you feel noticed, heard, and loved? If not, how could you have benefitted from someone who did so? How are you supporting others to feel seen and cared for?

Going the Extra Mile

Mom has always gone the extra mile, working as many as three jobs at a time and working on our farm harvesting fruit to sell on the weekends to make sure we had enough to eat, clean clothes and always — and I mean always — did our homework.

Mom was an elementary school teacher who made ends meet by working as a cashier at a local dime store after school and on weekends. During summer breaks, when she wasn't attending summer school earning one of her three master's degrees, she was working on our small family farm picking fruit to sell at the farmer's market.

Some of my favorite memories were rooted in our time together, preparing for the weekend's summer farmers' market in Santa Fe. We'd first weigh our little green plastic baskets on a small, portable scale to get their empty weight. Then, we'd carefully place the apricots, cherries, and plums into the baskets, filling each basket to the weight of a pound. We'd sell each

1 lb basket for \$3. Apples and pears (which we harvested later in the year) were placed into larger baskets but weighed in the same way, with the same scale.

What mom taught me, that her dad and mom (my Grandpa Mike and Grandma Sylvia) passed down to her, **was that every detail matters and your integrity matters.** My grandparents also imparted these four life lessons in words and example:

-If you take care of the little things, they'll take care of you

-Always leave things better than you found them.

-Whenever possible, share your light with someone else.

-Overcome with kindness

Those lessons were a theme through every aspect of their lives, and thankfully. I'm grateful to have had them as an example.

Every Penny Counts

My Grandfather used to keep a jar of change near his bedside. He'd empty his pockets and place that day's change in the jar. At the end of every month, I'd sit with Grandpa Mike at the kitchen table and help count every penny. We'd place the coins into paper tubes which he'd take to the bank later that week. For helping Grandpa Mike do this, he'd pay me a percentage of those earnings. I used this money to start my very first savings account. By the time I was 15, I had \$100 in the bank. Every penny mattered. If you take care of the little things, they'll take care of you.

Pause & Reflect

Make a list of ways you invest your resources (time, giftings, belongings). Is that investment producing growth in yourself and others—family, friends, colleagues, and

acquaintances? Are there any ways that you feel God growing and expanding your stewardship vision?

Leave It Better Than You Find It

One day I rode with Grandpa Mike to the grocery store in town. We went into “Center Market” — two coupon clippers with a plan and a purpose. Armed with his knowledge of store layout, we worked our shopping list from the outside of the store inward. It was my job to look for the brands our coupons covered and to keep track of the fine print of how many items were allowed per coupon.

One day, as we walked into the store, Grandpa Mike noticed a few shopping carts scattered through the parking lot. He began collecting them and asked me to help. I asked, “Grandpa? Why are you picking up the carts when you didn’t leave them there?” He said, “MiJita, it’s the right thing to do.” “But you didn’t leave them there,” I said. “It doesn’t matter. Let’s just take them in. We’re headed that way anyhow, right?” I said, OK, still unsure of why anyone would clean up a mess they didn’t make.

On the way home, he explained that leaving things better than you found them is simply good practice. It’s not about the person who left the mess, but if you see a mess do your best to make it better. Taking those carts into the store was a simple way to make a small difference. And it was about us and our character; we weren’t in any way being duped by someone too lazy to return their cart. We were given the opportunity to show kindness and integrity.

That day I learned it isn’t about anyone else but how I will react to those “messes” I encounter. I took this nugget into one of my first jobs in Nashville. Because I couldn’t afford a gym membership, I applied to work at the YMCA of Maryland Farms, one of the fanciest YMCAs in the area. The only position they had open was for a custodian. It paid \$9 an hour, but

I got a free membership. This was a 20-hour-a-week job that I scheduled on evenings and weekends because I still had my job at the film company from 9-5. I'd see music industry executives and artists daily, walking by as if I wasn't there. Occasionally they'd ask me to take their dirty towels to the bin or ask me where the clean towels were. One day I saw a man blow his nose into the gym towel and toss it on the floor by the weight machine he was using. He didn't think anyone would see him, but when he looked up, we locked eyes. I'm sure my expression told him I'd seen what he had done. I went over and picked that slimy thing up and took it to the laundry. I heard him chuckle as I walked away. Fast forward, five years later when I was a newly appointed vice president of PR at a record company. One of my first meetings was with a manager and his struggling artist. They were going to come in for my help with a press campaign they had difficulty with. Prepping for the meeting I noted that the music was great, sales growing, but I felt that the campaign was simply mismanaged. When the manager walked in, it all made sense in an instant. Why? The manager turned out to be old "snotty towel." This person lived life the same way in and out of the gym, cutting corners in his life, and in his clients' lives. I did what I could to help, but ultimately the artist parted ways with this manager, replacing him and his career took off.

The lesson is that a person's character, defined by integrity, spills over into every part of their life. If a person cheats or cuts corners in one area, it's highly likely they'll do the same in other areas. Colossians 3:23 says "And whatever you do, do it heartily, as to the Lord and not to men." Whether it's picking up after yourself in a public setting or returning grocery carts someone else was incapable of returning them, always do the courteous thing, not because of who may be watching, but because of your integrity. Always leave things better than you found them.

Pause & Reflect

How have you fostered the habit of leaving things better than you found them? What are small and large ways that you “improve the atmosphere” with your presence? Do you tend to be an absorber of the atmosphere around you?

Light Up the Room

My Grandma Sylvia’s kitchen was the heartbeat of her home. She was up at 4:30 am daily to make coffee, tortillas, sausage, and eggs. Grandpa Mike was up at the same time feeding his pigs and getting ready to go to the 15-acre orchard across the four-lane highway. When he returned, Grandma had breakfast ready. They’d pray for their food, sit together to eat, and then open their filling station and general store by flipping “on” the Texaco station light which sat atop a 20-foot-high signpost. It was a round, flat sign with a red Texaco star painted on it. There were *two bulbs above the sign that lit up the star. That sign was the only one for miles and shined* through the darkness, welcoming travelers to my tiny hometown.

There was something special about the light, the star, and its welcoming warmth. It represented safety, refreshment, and hospitality.

Grandma Sylvia once told mom that one candle doesn’t dim by lighting another. If you use your candle to light someone else’s, the first candle doesn’t dim, but multiple candles brighten the darkness together. She also said your light burns brighter if there’s more oxygen. So, the fresher air you let in, the brighter your flame.

Likewise, sharing wisdom, encouragement, your lunch, paper, pen, or smile – like a candle’s flame – you brighten the world around you.

Matthew 5:15 says, “nor does anyone light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a lampstand, and it gives light to all who are in the house” (AMP).

Outshine Life's Bullies

Now, this light doesn't just mean "things." It can also mean stepping up for someone being mistreated, which takes bravery. I saw an example of this kind of "light" in the 7th grade. I was the new kid at a big school. I was much smaller than all the other girls and was picked on mercilessly by both boys and girls. It got to the point where I couldn't focus on my schoolwork because I feared many classmates. One September day, I was walking from my homeroom to science class. It seemed as if I walked 100 years down a narrow pathway past the gym to get there. This part of the day gave me anxiety because that walkway was lined with shade trees and had an overhang covering the concession booths.

The girls who used to bully me would hide in that shaded area. When I'd walk to science class, they'd call me names and say, "We're gonna get you." On this day, the group of six girls decided to pounce. I was most afraid of Colleen, as she was the biggest of the girls and the self-appointed group leader. Someone pushed me down from behind, and I fell forward onto my knees, dropping my books and cutting the heels of my hands on the asphalt walkway. I looked up to see Colleen walking toward me, saying, "You're gonna get it." I closed my eyes. Then I heard a voice from behind me. "Get away from her, NOW." I opened my eyes to see a dark-haired girl from homeroom with fists in front of her face—bouncing up and down on her toes like boxers do. All the girls scattered. She looked over at me. "Are you ok?" she said. I responded, "Yes. I'm just embarrassed."

She waited for them to walk away before saying, "I'm Michelle. Don't let them get to you. I have my class in the next room over. We can walk together to our classes if you want. This is Jennifer." She pointed to a slender girl with blonde braids, a gray and black plaid button-down shirt, highwater jeans, and a yellow backpack. "We walk together to avoid those bullies. It

seems they only like to pick on you when you're alone. From now on, you will walk with us.”

“Okay,” I said. From that day on we were the best of friends.

Pause & Reflect

Recall a time when someone has brought light into your life — shining hope into your darkness or igniting you to move forward. How have you responded in the past to the bullies of life? What actions can you take to incorporate being a light to others? Take a moment and list tangible goals to accomplish this task.

That school year reinforced what my mom and grandparents first shared, in words and by example—it matters what you do when no one is looking. **God used my family to teach me the foundations of integrity, and that adversity can strengthen you if you let it.** When we embrace these lessons, we grow in ways we couldn't foresee. The result often influences others to embrace growth as well.

“But he’s already made it plain how to live, what to do, what God is looking for in men and women. It’s quite simple: Do what is fair and just to your neighbor, be compassionate and loyal in your love. And don’t take yourself too seriously— take God seriously” Micah 6:8 (MSG).

Leading in Prayer

Heavenly Father, Thank you for loving me enough to challenge me to live with integrity. Let me reflect your light and love to those I encounter. Please open my eyes to opportunities where I can value, invest in, and inspire others. Help me to hear clearly, and act without hesitation, when You speak. Lead me to be fair, compassionate and operate in love. Amen.

Chapter 25

Babbie Mason—You Be YOU



*For Gospel Music Hall of Fame inductee **Babbie Mason**, living life in a performance mode, which started early in her childhood at her father's church, was the only life she knew. Babbie's roots trace back through five generations of pastors. Ministry is in her blood. The church stage was comfortable, familiar, yet an easy place for the real Babbie—the Babbie God knew—to slip into the shadow curtained by the expectations of others.*

This award-winning singer, songwriter, author, talk show host, and adjunct professor of songwriting at Pointe University and Lee University finally made a remarkable discovery. God didn't want her to continue hiding her true self. Babbie wants you also to discover the beautiful leader He's created, who is authentically, unashamedly, 100 percent YOU!

Square Peg. Round Hole.

Have you ever felt that you were different? That you didn't fit in? I get it. I struggled to be at peace with who I am for many years, particularly related to my musical style. I have loved music from as far back as I can remember. It was easy for me to play the piano by ear as a kid. I could listen to a song, sit down at the piano, and play it without any sheet music. I have a fond memory of being in the first grade. We had an old upright piano in our classroom. When our teacher had to dash across the hall to the school's front office, she would leave me in charge of entertaining my classmates until she returned. Needless to say, this musical gift earned me a full-time job as the church pianist and choir director in my pastor father's church. I was hired at age

nine and played for the church for almost 20 years. After graduating from college, I met my husband, Charles. Then I moved from Jackson, Michigan, to Atlanta, Georgia.

During those years, I grew up singing the traditional black gospel music of the '60s and '70s. The songs of Mahalia Jackson, Roberta Martin, James Cleveland, the Consolers, the Caravans, and the Nightingales defined the music of my early childhood. We sang their music every Sunday in our Baptist church choir. As I approached my early 20s and searched for my way as a musician, my style became less traditional and more contemporary. My musical sound became more middle of the road. As a budding solo singer, I gravitated toward the style of both black and white singer/songwriters of that decade. Blaring from the speakers on my record player in my small, second-floor apartment, you'd hear the music of contemporary Christian and gospel singers of that day. I emulated the music of both black and white singers such as Andrae Crouch, Edwin and Walter Hawkins, Dannibelle Hall, Evie Tornquist, Beverly Glenn, Second Chapter of Acts, and Honeytree. I was also greatly influenced by women who sang and played the piano. I easily belted out the songs of Aretha Franklin, Carole King, Nina Simone, Karen Carpenter and Roberta Flack.

In the early '90s, I entered the contemporary Christian music industry. I wrote and recorded songs like "All Rise," "Each One Reach One", "Standing in the Gap", "With All My Heart", "God Has Another Plan", "Pray On", and "In All of His Glory."

Pause & Reflect

What leadership qualities do you admire in others? Which of these qualities do you see in yourself? How have you seen God use these qualities in you?

Being the Misfit

I've never had the kind of voice that resembled many black female gospel singers. People often would hear my music on the radio and assume that I was a white woman. Then they would attend my concerts and be surprised to find that I was black. If I can be honest, that used to mess with my head. I felt that I was a misfit or that I was weird. I convinced myself that my music sounded too black for white people and too white for black people. There were many days that I felt inadequate about my music and self-conscious about my voice. I felt as though I were gray. Over time, though, I began to see something uniquely beautiful occurring in my concerts. From the stage, as I was singing in concert, I'd look out over the audience and see a gathering of the body of Christ represented consistently in those who attended my concerts. It is beautiful to see a blend of different races, denominations, and cultures coming together to worship the Lord.

Back in those days, quite frequently, I was the first black person ever to stand on the platform to sing in many southern white churches. Until they opened their doors to a Babbie Mason Concert, a blended gathering of believers had never occurred in many churches. God has used and is still using this ministry as a bridge to bring people together in worship instead of a category that keeps people polarized. Being a bridge can be difficult—even painful. Bridges help people cross over to the other side. Bridges take people over treacherous waters. And bridges get stepped on because they connect people. All of that can be uncomfortable at times. But bridges also help us to overcome obstacles. They inspire us and take us to places we could never reach without them. Bridges usher us to an apex—a vantage point that wouldn't be seen without them. For over three and a half decades, God has allowed me to usher people into the high places of His presence. In that regard, I'll be a bridge any day.

Pause & Reflect

In what areas of your life do you struggle with feeling like a misfit? Do these feelings impact how you view your leadership potential? Are there any aspects of your life where you can identify with being a bridge? How could you shift your thinking to utilize perceived weaknesses and find joy in using who you authentically are to help others?

Celebrating Uniquely Me

When I saw that God was using my voice to bring people together, I celebrated the distinct quality of my voice and God's unique calling on my life. I stopped seeing myself as weird and started seeing myself as unique. I began to walk in my destiny and call with confidence. I have learned that most often, the very thing we think is the strangest about us is the same thing God wants to use to set us apart and establish our uniqueness for His glory. God will use what we consider a weakness or liability to show Himself strong.

In 2 Corinthians 12:9, the Apostle Paul reminds us of what our Lord told him during his struggle. "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." I thank God for those who showed me the way and gave me great music to imitate. I praise God for their musical gifts. Those artists I mentioned and many more that I didn't were excellent role models for me. But eventually, I had to find my way and be true to myself and God's purpose for me. That's what I'm saying to you. It's okay to look to others for guidance. But eventually, you will need to discover your unique path.

Don't settle for a watered-down version of yourself. You'll only be limiting yourself. And you'll undoubtedly be limiting what God can do through you. Who will represent you if you are busy trying to be a copycat of someone else? If two people are precisely the same, one of them will be unnecessary. Have you ever had duplicate files on your computer? Your computer will let you know so you can keep the original file and delete the copy to save space. Do you see

the beauty and the importance of just being your authentic self? Don't ever apologize to others for your uniqueness. Being different is a good thing. It means you have finally found the courage just to be yourself. God did not create you to blend in among the masses. He made you to stand out!

This means you can keep your eyes on heaven while your feet are firmly planted as you complete your earthly mission. God created you to be heavenly-minded, yet you have the potential to do earthly good because God endowed you with a plethora of gifts and talents to be used to impact the world. That uniqueness you have—that ingredient that sets you apart from the rest of humanity—is the key to your strength. It's your superpower! Don't run from your uniqueness; embrace it. Your uniqueness sets you apart from the rest! This is not by mistake—it's divinely designed. To be authentic is to be right at home with yourself, being true to yourself and the godly values you represent.

Own Your Different

The life God has planned for you begins with owning your unique set of gifts, talents, and strengths. When you focus outwardly on the things others are doing, inwardly desiring the path they're on, you will become greatly confused and distracted. What does God's Word say about this? "Such a person is double-minded and unstable in all they do" (James 1:8, NIV). You don't have time for that. Instead, look to God and His Word for the validation you need.

As you pray for God's power, you'll be less tempted to seek the affirmation of others. Why? Because you won't need it. God's hand on your life is all the validation you need. God will continue to open doors for you as you do good because you only want to make *Him* look good here on earth. Pattern your life after Christ. Look to *Him* where your true identity originates. You must never hesitate to embrace your true, authentic self. I'll remind you of what

God told the Prophet Samuel when he looked for Israel's next king. "Man looks at the outward appearance, but God looks at the heart" (1 Samuel 16:7).

Pause & Reflect

On a scale of 1 (none) to 5 (often), how frequently do you look to others to affirm the gifts you have? Are there any gifts you would be using if you weren't concerned with what others might think? How do you think these gifts might line up with God's call on your life, wherever you are serving now?

I'm approaching four decades in ministry since I retired from my job as a middle-high school music teacher. I found that I didn't quit teaching. My classroom just got bigger. Take some advice from this classroom teacher. No matter how daunting the task may be, if God calls you to it, He will certainly empower you to do it. Remember, nobody can do what you can do like you can do it. Don't be afraid. Don't be intimidated. Be yourself. Everyone else is taken.

Leading In Prayer

Heavenly Father, Thank You for making me not only different but uniquely different. Help me remember that You created me with gifts, talents, and strengths like no one else on the planet. Please give me the confidence to be the sole expression of myself. Not so I can look good but so that I can give You glory with my life. Forgive me for looking to others and even the world for the validation I can only receive from You. As I read Your Word, I will find my true identity in You! Amen

Chapter 26

Lisa Burris Burns: Be a Surrendered Creative



With more than 40 years experience in the arts and 30+ years of platform ministry, Lisa Burris Burns thrives on the creative process. Always under the belief that we can fine-tune our creative expression, she enjoys coaching up-and-coming artists. Her specialties include vocal and stage performance, public speaking and media writing, publicity, event planning, set design, and all things yarn and crafty.

Lisa lives in Blue Springs, Missouri, with her husband, Randy. The Burns have served in marriage and family ministry since 1988. They have six fantastic children, two amazing son-in-loves, and five adorable granddaughters. When Lisa isn't busy being a wife, mom, and Nonni, she enjoys the role of mentor and coach for KC Superstar. This four-month-long "American Idol"-style competition for area high school students serves as an annual fundraising event for "The JKC," the Jewish Community Center of Greater Kansas City. She has worked as a publicist and is an award-winning contributor to Leading Hearts magazine (leadinghearts.com). Her passion is to help people of all ages become the best version of themselves.

A Renaissance Spirit in a File Drawer Brain

We're highly encouraged from a young age (some would say indoctrinated) to have a plan, be structured, and get after it. Success happens because we first do x-y-z. You know, set the goal, plot the journey, and see it through. Let's keep everything ordered and in sequence. Get the education, pay your dues, and climb our way to the top!

My earliest days were spent in a small rural farming community where I was surrounded by both sides of my parent's families. There were cattle and Kansas wheatfields as far as you could see. I was the child that would strive to do my very best. Moving within well-plotted courses and constructs felt secure, predictable, and safe. Innately I loved to line things up and pay attention to the details. And yet, if I am being totally transparent, there were times that things felt a bit stifling. My mind loved everything in its place and ordered thinking, but it also swirled with ideas that felt like make-believe. Despite all my planned and ordered thoughts, I have a flair for the creative. To this day, I am often divided between logically and perfectly spaced and things that are birthed in daydreams and what-ifs. Stepping outside what was expected was a challenge and created inner tension. As the family's firstborn, hard-working and compliant, I tended to feel irresponsible when drawn into creative spontaneity. In a nutshell, I have often been torn between the strong desire to be ordered and structured yet synchronously distracted by all things artistically flourished.

There are life experiences that cause me to say with confident excitement, "*Now this.... This all makes perfect, predictable, and logical sense!*" It's as it should be, given everything I've trained, worked toward, and planned for. And then again, I have moments when I ask myself, "*How in the world did I arrive here?*". Seriously, who would have thought I'd be right here, doing this, right now? Certainly not me! I mean, I didn't plan for it, and it wasn't the neatly packaged outcome of forethought and set goals. Prior to me on this side of now, my brain struggled to stretch wide enough to even consider most of the opportunities I've walked through. But that is my life... Equal doses of *what in the world* **and** *perfectly planned for*. It has taken time to embrace that an intentional Creator designed me to overflow with BOTH. I've had to be willing to put aside my fears and insecurities. **Doing things with a brave heart and choosing a**

path in uncharted territory does stretch you (often uncomfortably) to heights you didn't realize you could aspire to. Knowing the Creator was thoughtful about my journey and how I am equipped for the space I'm in right now has made all the difference.

Pause & Reflect

In what ways are your childhood dreams and aspirations reflected in your daily life? Take time to list some of those dreams. Do you see any of your interests and talents in conflict with one another? If so, how has this affected your ability to focus over the years?

Embracing a Both/And Mentality

I must admit that my willingness to embrace both sides — the administrative check-off-the-box girl and her free-spirited counterpart — was neither an easy nor an overnight journey. Many things influence us as we grow into our adult selves—our family, the community, and our culture. For instance, music is at the core of my being. My parents graduated high school in the early 60s and had me before the age of 20. There was always music playing on the turntable or radio. Some of my favorite childhood memories include Daddy strumming a James Taylor song on his guitar. Momma would sing along with the radio and let me stay up late to watch a musical on television. By the time I was in middle school, my parents were working to provide me with vocal lessons. It made sense that music was something I would do. What sparked my interest as a child soon had me training, competing, and performing. I learned to live, eat, breathe, and excel in all things stage and song! Singing a thought-provoking lyric and melody was that place where all the daydreaming came to life. It sometimes felt like I was floating on a river current, just caught up with what was supposed to happen. My senior year began, and I did what seemed to be the right thing, the responsible thing, and auditioned for vocal scholarships at our state

university. All the practice, planning, and passion for music paid off when I received a full ride to study voice. My next steps were falling into line.

So, here I was, walking in what appeared to be a perfect sequence of events, when I encountered a bend in the road ahead of me quite unexpectedly. I had a sweet friend who rode the bus to and from school with me daily. Her family had encountered Jesus over the summer, and there was no denying that she was changed. From the minute she stepped on the bus that would take us to high school and the entire way home, she would share her journey. This went on for weeks.

Many people say that we come into this world with a God-shaped hole or void that only He can fill. Deeper still, I believe we are intrinsically wired from our first moments of existence to connect with our Creator. While I wasn't raised attending weekly church services, I was keenly aware of His presence. I remember in grade school spending a Saturday night with my friend Yvonne. My mom packed a dress so I could attend service with Yvonne's family at the local Lutheran church. I didn't understand all the words nor why there was the scent of burning incense, but I felt a strong sense of belonging. Throughout my childhood, I attended every church service anyone invited me to. Baptist Vacation Bible School? I went. Catholic mass? I was there for it. The local Charismatic Church youth meeting? Yes, please. You see, the older I became, the more aware I was of God's presence. I was moved deeply by those services, and then at the same time, I didn't know quite what to do with how they made me feel. Fast forward to my senior year of high school, and God allowed me to hear the redemption story through a teenage girl on a school bus. My life would never be the same, in the best way ever.

Looking back now at that turn in the road, I recognize that it was the first of many times I would unexpectedly redirect. I also realize that the One who knows and loves me best designed

every bend in my path perfectly. When it happened, I wasn't sure how things would turn out. I attended the university on a full vocal scholarship. One semester in, and much to my parent's demise, I walked away from the scholarship and transferred to a private Bible college. What was a nicely executed plan somehow turned sideways. On the one hand, I was full of apprehension and fear in the unknown— How would I pay for Bible college? Will my parents ever forgive me for giving up that scholarship? Is music still a part of the plan? On the other hand, I had tapped into a newfound sense of freedom. This feeling was all wrapped up in letting go. Letting go of my well-thought-out plans. Releasing the control, I had over the outcome of those plans. Embracing the possibilities along the journey. Trusting in a God that slowly and surely was lighting up my world.

Pause & Reflect

How did the culture of your upbringing shape your adult aspirations? Take a moment to reflect on any detours you encountered along your life journey. How has your faith walk influenced the choices you have made? Describe a time when taking hold of a new opportunity involved letting go.

Mastering the Quick Change

As a new believer immersed in Bible college, my discipleship journey began in the classrooms of theologians. I learned to live up close and personal within the family of God—the girls living on my dorm floor. I learned to navigate and see the differences between performing versus service. I became increasingly aware of the presence of God and the sound of His whisper. Bible college is where I met my best friend, who I married a year and a half later. We didn't know where we were going, but we had each other and knew God was showing himself faithful.

The years began to carry us along as our sweet family grew with children. We embraced ministry together. Life was full and continued to get fuller with all the things —learning what it meant to become a mother, establish relationships, develop ministries, and etch out time to hear from God.

The more space that “life” consumed, the more I relied on what I didn’t have to work hard at. Those things made sense and were predictable. The things that I was confident in and trained for. It felt good to contribute with the giftings I had. I continued to be the youth pastor’s wife and a full-time mom. I sang with gospel groups, taught vocal lessons, and led worship. We moved several states away for Randy to study counseling and acquire his master’s degree. With our third child on the way, I became the primary source of income by teaching at a local preschool. My husband went from stay-at-home dad/grad student by day to shift manager at Taco Bell by night. God was so good to us during those insanely blurred years.

Though I told myself it was only for a season, the days began to roll into one another. Good memories alongside tragedy drove us to our knees and into each other’s arms. We had an opportunity to move back home to be close to family. We lost a child and cared for loved ones who were struggling. Our family went from four to seven. As the children grew, so did our schedule as we helped them acclimate. I was a master juggler, ever dancing in multiple directions. I continued leading worship weekly, sang in the choir, and started to coordinate all weddings and events for our very large congregation. I was consumed with the tasks of caregiving, doing what others needed or what I thought was expected of me. Most of the time, I ran on sheer adrenaline. Often when I needed to reach for the next thing, I did so on autopilot.

You have probably found yourself in the space of constant go, go, go. God has equipped many of us with the ability to multi-task profoundly! It truly is a superpower! When I commit to

something, I'm all in—motherhood, production work, and service to others. **However, if we're not careful, we can wake up one day not recognizing who we are or why we do what we do.**

For me, everything was about to come to a halt.

Pause & Reflect

How have the different roles you've played in life clouded or clarified your sense of purpose? What is your current understanding of God's purpose for your life? In what ways do you walk out your purpose in your day-to-day activity?

The Day Go Stopped

I wasn't feeling well. At 45, I found myself in a constant state of fatigue. I would push myself from one event to the next, and then my body would just stop. I would spend hours in continuous motion on a Sunday and then could barely make it up the stairs and into bed when I got home. The simplest daily household chores became difficult. I felt like I was trying to climb uphill in quicksand just showering, dressing, or brushing my teeth. Every muscle in my body felt like they were on fire, and my very bones ached. I realized this wasn't simply age or not being in the best of shape. I needed a physician.

The diagnosis was autoimmune disease, and it looked like more than one. I was told that, short of a miracle, there was no cure. Medications and lifestyle changes could help with the extreme symptoms, but then again, they might not. Anything concerning my connective tissues (tendons, ligaments, and joints) was affected the most. Over a series of several weeks and multiple medical appointments, we had a plan of action but no quick and easy fix. If this was my new normal, I needed to get a feel for what it would take to improve my quality of life. **I prayed that God would heal me, knowing that He definitely could. I also prayed that if healing wasn't in the near future, He would somehow redeem these moments.**

Everything about who I was and what seemed to make me, Lisa, was unsure. I didn't want to think about it. However, I realized that the things I had become really good at—the daily dance of activity and even my vocal ability, were compromised. The conversation in my brain was ongoing, “Perhaps if I shift this around and only participate every other week?” “Maybe I lay low for a few days to conserve enough energy to marathon through this project?” I eventually explained my situation to those I loved, served, and worked with. I had a difficult time letting them down. Some relationships took a severe hit because I couldn't be “on” all the time. It can be tough to understand and accept the limitations of a loved one with a chronic illness. I had to step away from certain commitments. I realized that my focus needed to be on my family and doing what was necessary to regain my strength.

Those days were just hard. To pull away from all that I had busied myself with for so many years was painful. The music, specifically worship and platform ministry, had been a constant companion for 25 years. Those connective tissue problems began to affect my singing voice. I can tell you now my identity was honestly quite shaken. My heart was hurting. In so many ways, I felt I didn't belong anymore and wasn't sure if I would ever again. **A choice had to be made, and I was the only one who could make it. Was I going to stay stuck in my brokenness, or was I going to ask God to help me move forward?**

Pause & Reflect

If you've experienced a life-altering event, how did it affect your sense of value and worth? How have you reconciled yourself to the loss you experienced due to that event? Are there any areas related to loss where you remain stuck?

A Risky Surrender

From that moment through those transitional years, and even now, my prayer became: “Jesus, I’m willing. I’m a willing participant in whatever you choose to do with me and through me. It doesn’t have to be familiar. If you are with me, I say yes. It doesn’t have to be predictable. I don’t even have to feel like I can handle it. If you are with me, I will do it. I trust you.” I didn’t have a clue how God would take that little prayer and change *everything*, but He did. The bottom line, I had to readjust the expectations I had placed on myself. As I continued to learn more about my health and how to embrace my new way of doing things, I reminded God of my prayer. Along the way, I started to let my mind and heart wander again into daydreams and what-ifs.

A year later, when a friend asked, “Lisa, have you ever considered working in film?” my response was to laugh and say absolutely “No.” She reminded me that having experience as a stage actor, I might really like it. But I couldn’t picture it. I mean, I was a singer who couldn’t sing consistently, and a stage play is so different from film work. I didn’t know the first thing about filmmaking or auditioning for a movie. And yet, I couldn’t quit thinking about the possibility that maybe God was putting feet on my “I’m willing, and I say yes!” prayer. I returned to that friend, and with her help, I auditioned and landed a role in a feature-length film. I didn’t sing one familiar note in that film. Nothing I had ever planned for or envisioned myself doing included me saying yes to a movie role.

Before I knew it, one opportunity bumped into the next. A random phone call came from another acquaintance asking if I might consider applying to work as a prop mistress for a movie-turned-stage play. She felt I could be the perfect fit, knowing my background. Once again, my response was to immediately reject the very thought. I mean, seriously, it was roughly a four-month commitment, almost four hours from my school-aged children and husband. How was this even possible? I remember almost laughing through my explanation of the call with my husband.

It was a ridiculous idea, right?? There was no way I was leaving all of them to go work with people I didn't really know. I would have to find a place to stay. My pay would have to outweigh what it would take to live there. Suddenly, the idea's absurdity came to a halt when Randy said, "I think this is a God thing, Lisa. I think you are supposed to do it. At the very least, listen to what they have to say." Hmmm, what was that prayer again? Oh, that's right, "I don't even have to feel like I can handle it. If you are with me, I will do it. I trust you."

Unbeknownst to me, every detail and concern I questioned was already covered. Through an old friend from high school, I was connected to a dear family that provided me a home away from home during the show's duration. They have become extended family to us, and we visit every chance we can. I'm sitting in the peace of their home on this day as I round out this chapter. One season of the show turned into two. I worked with some of the most gifted people who reinforced the power of true teamwork. With previous experience in front of an audience, I missed out on the brilliance of the movers and shakers behind the scenes. Their impact on me can't be measured. In my absence, my children and husband met every challenge without me just fine. The job ended up being such a sweet way for God to provide for and grow us all.

That out-of-town production experience coincided with my 16-year-old daughter winning a local singing competition. With time, I became a part of that incredible competition and the KC Superstar production team. Though heartache came with my chronic illness affecting my own ability to perform, I've been able to pour what I know into others. For ten years, I've had the pleasure of coaching some of the most talented teen vocalists you will ever meet.

Before I knew it, I was asked to contribute to a women's magazine, interviewing artists, authors, and film industry professionals. Once again, one opportunity leading to the next, I have had the honor of working as a publicist with the best, pitching some outstanding projects. Throw in a few

more film, and stage sets later, and I also said yes to set design and scripty duties. No, I didn't plan for any of it, but look what saying yes can do.

Pause & Reflect

Are you willing to allow God to use you in a way you haven't considered possible? Have you been presented with any opportunities that would enable you to reframe your gifts? List ways you have allowed your vision to be limited to what you know and are comfortable with.

Does He have Your “Yes”?

Ultimately, we have a choice to be *willing* participants in our life's story.

Occasionally my fears and insecurities have kept how I am used by God confined to a tiny space. We do come into this world with God-given abilities and passions. Certain events may leave us stumbling and taken off guard, but forward motion and redirection are possible. It doesn't have to look exactly as it has in the past. My own personal journey has taken flight into uncharted and gloriously new territories. God has strategically placed within you every detail that equips you for your right now journey with Jesus.

“Everything that goes into a life of pleasing God has been miraculously given to us by getting to know, personally and intimately, the One who invited us to God. The best invitation we ever received!” 2 Peter 1:3 (MSG).

It isn't always predictable, comfortable, or without challenge. But when you add your own yes to the equation, you are on your way to quite the adventure.

Leading In Prayer

Heavenly Father, When my heart is torn between what makes sense and bold daydreams, I thank you for dwelling in the “Both/And” moments of my life. I ask that you guide me and continue to walk with me as I journey. Give me courage to take hold of opportunity as you lead

me forward and beyond. While I love the comfort of familiar, and predictable, let me embrace the adventure of uncharted territories ahead. I'm a willing participant and I trust You. If You are with me, I can do it. Amen