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God's Dreams For You

Rediscovering your purpose and passions



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Introduction

The Bottom of the List

By Kelli B. Trujillo

Over the last several months, I've had many difficult phone conversations with a close friend I'll call "Sara" who lives far away. Due to some very tough life circumstances, Sara has become extremely discouraged and depressed. Because we're unable to see each other, I didn't realize how bad things had become until one phone conversation when Sara told me she literally spends hours and hours playing computer games all day. She told me that her daily routine had become a dull and lifeless cycle which perpetuated her discouragement: her mornings and evenings were entirely devoted to caring for her kids and husband and her days were filled with ever-worsening boredom and monotony.

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When I heard this honest confession, I was startled. Sara is a woman with absolutely stunning musical talents. She's a woman whose gusto for creating delicious, healthy meals launched my own interest in cooking. She's always been someone with a sense of herself and a zest for life. I knew her as a woman of passion and purpose ... but somehow it had all slipped away.

Along with encouraging her through prayer and listening, I challenged Sara to find time to pursue her own dreams—even if it's just 30 minutes a week.

"To be honest, I don't know what my dreams are anymore," she told me. "I don't know who *I am* anymore."

Ever been there? Whether it's due to painful circumstances, extreme busyness, or maybe just your season of life (such as the child-rearing years), have you ever woken up one day and realized you were "dreamless"? In all your giving, supporting, and sacrificing for others, have you lost sight of your own passions? Like Sara, have your own dreams been shuffled so far down your list of priorities that they don't even register on your radar screen any more?

God has dreams for your life. God has a purposeful calling for every season and stage along the way. And God desires for you to live in his calling—to rediscover those dreams he has for you and make them a reality through his power. When you're living out God's dreams for you, you'll most fully be the person he designed you to be.

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In this download, you'll find inspiration from Liz Curtis Higgs who rediscovered one of her deep passions a full 35 years after she'd first zeroed in on it. You'll be challenged by Katie Brazelton as she shares insights from her own journey from extreme discouragement to a discovery of her life's purpose. And you'll be touched by the story of how God tugged Kay Warren out of her familiar, safe, soccer-mom life into a calling she'd never expected.

Next you'll move into specific encouragement for your *own* journey of dream discovery. In "Go Ahead—Dream!" you'll find several key starting points for connecting with God's calling in your life as well as advice for navigating the roadblocks that get in our way. You'll take some time to reflect on the dangers of "Dream Poppers"—those well-meaning people whose advice or disapproving demeanor can stop us right in our tracks, preventing us from really going after the dreams God has placed within our hearts. And you'll find some great practical advice about making some dream lists from TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN senior editor Camerin Courtney. Finally, you'll end with the challenge of answering the question "Who are you?" in just a few sentences. You'll be encouraged to articulate the unique sense of purpose you feel God has for your life.

In case you're wondering about Sara, I just got a phone call from her the other day. She told me she'd gotten up early to workout for the first time in months, then in the afternoon she'd played the piano for 30 minutes. It was just a start, but I could hear a tremendous difference in her voice already. She sounded a bit more like herself again—the self God designed her to be. Sara's still at the

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start of the journey toward rediscovering God's dreams for her, but *wow!* what a difference those first steps made.

Loving, serving, and sacrificing for others are noble callings. But God doesn't want you to live with his unique dreams for *you* at the very bottom of your priority list! Whether these articles help you take those very first steps of discovery or they just urge you on along the path you're already walking, I hope that the wisdom shared by these authors enables you to vibrantly live out your God-designed dreams!

Grace,

Kelli B. Trujillo

Managing Editor, TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN downloads,
Christianity Today International



Leader's Guide

How to use “God’s Dreams for You” for a group study

“**G**od's Dreams for You" can be used for individual or group study. If you intend to lead a group study, some simple suggestions follow.

- 1. Make enough copies for everyone in the group to have her own guide.**
- 2. Depending on the time you have dedicated to the study, you might consider distributing the guides before your group meets so everyone has a chance to read the material. Some articles are quite long and could take a while to get through.**
- 3. Alternately, you might consider reading the articles together as a group—out loud—and plan on meeting multiple times.**
- 4. Make sure your group agrees to complete confidentiality. This is essential to getting women to open up.**
- 5. When working through the "Reflect" questions, be willing to make yourself vulnerable. It's important for women to know that others share their experiences. Make honesty and openness a priority in your group.**
- 6. End the session in prayer.**



Hidden Treasure

What secret gifts and dreams has God tucked in your heart?

By Liz Curtis Higgs

Did you have a secret wish as a child, something you longed to do "someday" when you grew up? Me, too. I wanted to write a novel.

When you make such a bold confession at age 10, people hide their smiles. "Is that so? Good luck, honey," they comment. (For the record, they say the same thing when you're 20, 30, 40, or 50.)

At 10, I only heard the "good luck" part.

I bought a ruled notebook with a fake marble cover and began my first novel, *The Mountain Cabin Mystery*. Handwritten with a Ticonderoga pencil, it was page after page of perfectly awful prose, such as ...

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"Eighteen-year-old Betsy Lane was a girl of action and excitement." (Oh, dear. Pray for Betsy.)

"She found a thin manilla (hmmm ... like vanilla?) envelope in the secret passageway, hidden in a dark corner." (Never guess I was writing a mystery, huh?)

Three months later, I proudly displayed the finished product on my bookshelf, bought a second notebook, and started *The Secret of Lakeview Manor*, followed by *The Ghost of Pine Lane*, *The Mystery at Snow Castle*, *A Clue by Candlelight* ... you get the idea.

Nancy Drew: Take Two, with deepest apologies to Carolyn Keene.

Ten juvenile mysteries poured from my pencil before I went off to college, storing my fiction hopes in a cardboard box in my parents' attic. Those notebooks quietly gathered dust while I pursued a broadcasting career, then marriage, motherhood, and public speaking, my dream of writing a novel all but forgotten.

But God didn't forget, not for one patient minute.

He nudged me year after year—just as he may be tugging at your heart right now—whispering, "What are you waiting for, child? Open it. Open your gift." Since "every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights" (James 1:17), then you can be sure whatever gifts were tucked in your young heart came from the hand of God.

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Often we display our gifts proudly as children, then hide them in adulthood, hoping no one will ask us, "Do you draw? Can you play the piano? Do you know how to sew?"

"Not really," we murmur, fearing risk, dreading failure, convinced those things we loved to do as kids were nothing but child's play, when in truth they were a gift from God, placed in our small hands with big expectations.

Last summer, my husband came strolling into my office, a grin stretched across his face. "Your brother called. Says he found something of yours in the attic."

When the crate from Pennsylvania arrived, I paged through *The Mountain Cabin Mystery*, teary-eyed and overwhelmed. I'd forgotten the story, but I remembered well the girl who wrote it—curled up on her bedroom chair, pouring her heart out on those lined pages, dreaming of the day she might write a real novel.

The Lord knew, long before I knew him, that I would become a storyteller someday. Just as I'd hidden that box in the attic for safekeeping, God had stored that dream deep inside a corner of my heart and waited for me to find it again.

"Someday" took a long while. From my first pretend novel to my first published one took—*gulp!*—35 years. By our measure, a lifetime. By God's reckoning, right on time.

My kids looked over my shoulder, wide-eyed, as I paged through my notebooks. "Wow, Mom. If you were an author when you were ten, why'd you wait so long to start writing stories again?"

You and I know the truth: The question isn't "Why did I wait so long?" The question is, "Why wait another minute?"

Open your gift, beloved. It's never too late for a child's dream to see the light of day.

Liz Curtis Higgs is the award-winning author of dozens of books, both fiction and non-fiction. This article was first published in the November/December 2002 issue of TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN.

Reflect

- *What dreams did you have for your life when you were a child? What were your favorite activities? What were your talents, interests, and passions?*
- *Do you still have those dreams, talents, interests, and passions? Why or why not? Like Liz did, have you put your dreams on the backburner because of other demands in your life?*
- *Read **James 1:17**. Liz believes that "whatever gifts were tucked in your young heart came from the hand of God." Do you agree? Which personal gift (dream, interest, talent) did God bring to mind for you as you read the story of Liz's own journey back to fiction writing?*



Becoming a Purpose-Filled Woman

Saddleback minister Katie Brazelton helps you understand your place in this world.

Interview by Jane Johnson Struck

Almost two decades ago, Katie Brazelton found herself divorced and suddenly devoid of the roles she'd used to define her life. This agonizing transition—and the purposelessness that ensued—left her in an emotional free fall, wondering if "the only logical life purpose [she] had left was shopping" for clothes to compensate for a depression-triggered weight loss.

*Slowly and painfully, Katie began to recover a sense of purposeful living after a life-changing encounter with Mother Teresa during a 1988 trip to Calcutta. As a result of her long journey of spiritual growth and discovery, outlined in *Pathway to Purpose* (Zondervan), Katie realized her call to mentor other searching women. A licensed minister at Rick Warren's Saddleback Church in California and author of the *Pathway to Purpose* series, Katie has helped thousands discover their church ministry and life purpose, and she's now training others to do the same. So if you're wondering about your place in this world, here's what Katie has to say to you.*

Why are you so passionate about women living lives of purpose?

Because for years after my divorce, I didn't. The angst of purposelessness almost tore me apart. But one of the most important components of my healing was learning that finding purpose is a universal heart cry. I wasn't alone in yearning for a life that had significance!

If God has a purpose for us, why do we often feel as though we're simply going through the motions of living?

That's because when we're in "robot mode," we let busyness, noise, fear, or impure motives drive out that purpose. We guilt ourselves into doing the hard work of becoming holy in the day-to-day grind instead of experiencing the reward of fulfilling the reason God put us on earth!

I know I used to be more concerned with religious to-do lists and endless faith-driven obligations than with unearthing the buried passion God instilled in me. There was a time when I'd routinely ask myself, *Am I happy?* I was so unhappy, I couldn't even get the question out before I started sobbing.

We women need to discover our purpose in life for two reasons. First, fulfilling our purpose gives glory to God. Second, it releases us from the captivity of hopelessness and despair.

How do you define "purpose"?

For Christians, *purpose* is *being* and *doing* what God intends us to be and do: doing today what God asks us

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to do in our family, church, and community; being more like Christ; and then doing the distinct, bold work God designed us to do before we die!

Scripture reveals the "pathway" to follow. It's spelled out in the Great Commandment (Matthew 22:36–39) and the Great Commission (Matthew 28:19–20). In *The Purpose-Driven Life*, my friend Rick Warren says these verses tell us we're ultimately made for fellowship, discipleship, ministry, evangelism, and worship.

But to discover our more unique life mission, we should pray specifically for God to reveal it; we should meditate on pertinent Scriptures, such as Psalm 37:4, Amos 4:13, Matthew 14:27, and John 17:1; and we should clear away some of the mental and emotional clouds that block us from his revelation.

What do you mean?

The Bible says, "Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 3:13–14).

After my divorce, I lived in manic mode; I'm amazed now I actually thought I could find God's purpose in the midst of my frantic life. I numbed my pain with overspending, travel, and work. It didn't occur to me numbing my pain *became* my purpose.

I had no idea how much my past influenced my everyday life. I needed to put my anger, regret, bitterness, and

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pain behind me before I could focus on the race God set before me. It took me years to hear God's voice over the noise and confusion in which I lived. As an immature Christian and an introvert, I didn't realize I needed more mature Christians who could help shed light on what God was saying to me about his will for my life.

So you're saying we can't be a lone ranger in this discovery process?

That's right. A woman trying to find her life purpose is like a novice trying to run a marathon. Both need a partner who can prepare them for the challenges and risks that lie ahead. Many women fail to fulfill their significant life purposes because they have no Christian mentor or adviser to help them reach the next mile marker. Ecclesiastes 4:9–10 says, "Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their work: If one falls down, his friend can help him up. But pity the man who falls and has no one to help him up!"

God designed our purpose in life to happen in community—whether it's in person, online, through a telephone relationship, letter writing, or as an intercessory prayer warrior. Giving and receiving love is part of God's design, and nothing substitutes for interpersonal communication.

But community takes time—and we're all so busy!

Yes, but God's creative in bringing spiritual friendships into our lives. Christian community can happen anywhere: at a church Bible-study group, babysitting co-op, corporate lunch-time prayer group, gym, ministry setting, sports event, or hobby show.

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One fun way I've developed community is by belonging to a "Dreamer's Lunch Bunch;" we meet once a month at a salad bar for the sole purpose of holding each other accountable to God's call on our lives.

Being in community means I'm authentic in a group I trust. Because of the dangers of a "lone ranger" lifestyle, I rely on others to walk alongside me.

Is there a difference between having a purpose and having a passion?

Our *purpose* is being a woman of God and doing what he asks. Our *passions* are meant to be godly purpose-indicators. They are the things that make our heart sing; they help us identify and complete our purpose. For example, my passions include jigsaw puzzles, travel, and Sherlock Holmes mysteries. God's purpose for me is to help women figure out his call on their lives.

How can we become content with God's purpose for us, especially if it seems less visible or exciting than we'd envisioned or hoped?

The Bible warns us not to despise the day of the small things (from Zechariah 4:10). It says we need to look forward to when our Master says to us, "Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness!" (Matthew 25:21).

The best shortcut I've found to guard against jealousy over someone else's ministry is to invite God to reveal his vision for *your* life and to believe with all your heart

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he'll do so. If you find yourself envying others, confess it to them or at least to God, pray for them, and support them in their endeavors.

What's the bottom line on living purposefully?

In Acts 20:24, the apostle Paul says, "I don't care about my own life. The most important thing is that I complete my mission, the work that the Lord Jesus gave me—to tell people the Good News about God's grace" (NCV). And 1 John 2:17 says, "The world and its desires pass away, but the [wo]man who does the will of God lives forever." God wants us to heed the apostle Paul's counsel: "Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit" (Galatians 5:25). God wants us to be guided by the Holy Spirit.

I love the way God takes any willing Christian—no matter how broken or scarred her past—and weaves every thread of her life into his kingdom-building plan! He doesn't shy away from our hurts and failures but specializes in hope, second chances, and resurrections.

I never imagined my tough experiences would give me the substance I now need to minister to others. I had no idea God was preparing me to offer the same hope to other women he provided me every day. Our ordinary routines and daily roles—no matter what they are—can provide incredible opportunities to help others become more like Christ.

In the end, purposeful living is about hope. If you can hang onto the hope that God does have a plan for your

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life, as the Bible promises in Jeremiah 29:11, you'll make it through the tough days of the unknown and later, the tough days of fulfilling the bold purposes God assigns you.

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Reflect

- *Katie describes herself, saying, "I used to be more concerned with religious to-do lists and endless faith-driven obligations than with unearthing the buried passion God instilled in me." Can you relate? What "religious to-do list" items or "faith-driven obligations" take the forefront in your life? How much (or how little) fulfillment do you find in these things?*
- *Katie describes the yearning for purpose and significance as a universal heart-cry—as a desire of every human being. How have you felt this desire in your own life?*
- *Katie distinguishes between one's purpose and one's passions this way: "Our purpose is being a woman of God and doing what he asks. Our passions are meant to be godly purpose-indicators." What are some of your main passions in life right now, from hobbies to interests to causes?*

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- **Read Psalm 37:4.** *What are some of the heart desires that God has planted within you? What issues, activities, or experiences really invigorate you? How might these be connected to the purpose God has for you?*



Purpose-Driven Wife

How God gave Kay Warren a new dream for her life.

Interview by Jane Johnson Struck

*It took a magazine article in 2002 to completely change the trajectory of Kay Warren's comfortable suburban life. Then 48 and the wife of Rick Warren, author of the bestselling book *The Purpose-Driven Life* and pastor of Southern California's megachurch, Saddleback, Kay was a busy "soccer mom" of three who dreamed, once their nest was empty, of sharing a platform with Rick and ministering to pastors' wives.*

Then one day Kay picked up a news magazine and was arrested by an article on AIDS. When she read that 12 million children were orphaned in Africa due to AIDS, "I realized I didn't know even one orphan. I couldn't imagine millions of them anywhere," she admits. "That number haunted me. My life's never been the same."

Since that "divine appointment," Kay has become a woman on a mission. Her husband Rick has caught Kay's passion for HIV/AIDS ministry, and together they, along with lay teams from Saddleback and other Purpose-Driven churches, travel overseas to work with local church, business, and political leaders to combat the AIDS pandemic.

*But Kay's mission isn't only global; she's equally passionate about ministering to HIV-positive people in her community. To this end, Kay initiated an annual Saddleback-sponsored international HIV/AIDS conference, *Disturbing Voices*, to create awareness within the church body about the pressing local needs to minister to those with HIV.*

Did you ever wonder if you could even make a dent in an issue as big as AIDS?

Of course. But the day I read that article on Africa, I had my own Damascus Road experience. I was blinded by a reality outside my own. After that, I went to sleep thinking about those 12 million children; I woke up thinking about them. The Lord and I began this internal dialogue. I said, *This just can't be true. Because if it were, then I'd have to do something about it. But there's nothing I can do!*

After a month, I realized I had to decide either to go on with my plans or to let my heart become engaged. I sensed I couldn't face God when he asked me, "What did you do about those 12 million children I told you about?" How could I possibly respond, "Oh, that was so sad. But I had so many other good things on my agenda. I'm really sorry I wasn't able to get around to that. I hope that's OK"? The truth is, it wasn't OK—not for me, not for anybody. I decided to get involved. That's when God shattered my heart into a million pieces, and I became what I call a "seriously disturbed" woman.

What did you start doing?

Reading, watching videos, talking to anybody who knew anything about HIV. After eight months of that, I needed more. God captured my heart through Africa, so I

wanted to go to Africa. I first went to Mozambique at the invitation of a Christian relief organization.

How did that first visit impact you?

Nothing in American life prepared me for rural Africa. Nothing. Even the poorest of the poor here have it much better than most of those living in the rest of the world.

One of the first women I met was Joana. She was stick thin, plagued by unrelenting diarrhea, left homeless under a tree, dying of AIDS. Joana was so weak, she couldn't even crawl over to greet me. So her aunt scooped her up and placed her on a piece of plastic in front of me. I'll never forget Joana mustering every ounce of strength and dignity she could to pull herself up, fold her hands, and greet me.

I couldn't tell Joana she would be healed or that I could give her a roof over her head. But I *could* offer my presence, and by my presence, the presence of Jesus. And I could offer her the hope of heaven. I will never, ever forget Joana. That's why her picture hangs in my office. For me, AIDS wears a face. It's Joana's.

What happened after you returned?

If I started out seriously disturbed, I came back gloriously ruined. I couldn't live the way I used to live. I didn't have the same values. But I'm embarrassed to say that as I flew home, I stewed over the fact I didn't think pastors and churches in Africa were doing enough. Then God clearly asked me, *When was the last time you cared about anybody with HIV in your community?* The answer was "never."

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God quickly showed me my hypocrisy; I cared about people far away, but not for the HIV-positive people in my own church. I'm ashamed to admit I was full of fear and prejudice. I had to overcome several myths, including the one that AIDS in America was a gay man's disease.

But what if it *were* only a "gay disease"? That's where Christians start labeling people. There are "innocent victims"—a baby born to an HIV-positive mother, a woman infected by her spouse—and the perpetrators—a gay man, an unfaithful husband. Why does one set seem more deserving of love and compassion?

How dare we pretend our sin is worthy of God's grace, but somebody else's isn't? When I see lists of sins in Scripture, they're lumped together. Sin is brokenness. It's going against God. God's Word says if we break the law in the slightest part, we're guilty.

Did you have an inkling God would lead you in this direction?

I think he planted the seeds, but somehow, through the years, they'd gotten buried. I'd spent most of my 20s feeling inadequate. I didn't think I had many gifts, and I'd married Rick, a man with extraordinary gifts. When I compared myself to him and others, my gifts seemed so small.

In my 30s, I got caught up in raising our three children. But when I neared 40, life came crashing down.

How so?

When I was a little girl, I was molested by someone from my church. As an adult, I'd done a good job of pretending it hadn't affected me. I'd memorized Scripture, prayed for healing, done all the things I knew to do, but I'd built my life on a shaky foundation.

That shaky foundation couldn't bear the weight of all my life's growing pressures—the needs of my children, the demands of a huge church, the notoriety of my husband's ministry. I waved the white flag of surrender.

What happened?

I underwent intensive counseling for a couple years. That season of extreme brokenness was one of the best things that ever happened to me; through it, God rebuilt my life. I relearned things, unlearned others, and began to see myself in a new light. God was preparing me for what I do today. I couldn't even begin to minister to sexually broken children and adults if I hadn't let God mend my broken places.

What are you most passionate about?

Believers leading the way in loving. How will people know Jesus loves them unless we show up in love? And the truth is, whoever loves them first, wins them.

How can women start "showing up"?

Start with repentance. I had to repent of my enormous apathy. Even though I'd read God's Word from the time I was a little girl, somehow I'd skipped over all those verses about the poor and the sick.

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A third of Jesus' ministry was spent healing people. Jesus was full of compassion. He touched the lepers, the prostitutes, the people his society wanted nothing to do with.

Ask him to show you ways to live out his heart in your everyday life. I can't prescribe that for somebody else. If you don't feel called to reach out to HIV-positive people in your community, beg God to open your eyes to others who are poor, sick, or homeless. Once you do, then it becomes personal. And when it becomes personal, you start caring.

James 1:27 says, "Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress." What if more women adopted the unwanted children in our own country, or opened their homes to foster children? What if Christians *really* lived out James 1:27? I think we've severely underestimated what God wants to do through the church.

Everybody can do *something*. From your sink as you're washing your dishes, from the diaper-changing table as you're changing a diaper, you can be praying for people. The bigger issue is letting your heart be broken by what breaks God's heart. I long for Christians to live out a muscular faith that actually changes our world. It starts with prayer, then moves into action. I long for women not just to be caught up in who's got the best price of chicken this week. God's asked us to do and be so much more than that.

What kind of legacy do you hope to build?

I hope my children and grandchildren see a life of surrender and reckless abandonment to God. And in so doing, they'll be willing, as Isaiah 58 and 61 say, to expend themselves for the needy, the poor, the immigrant, the sick. To pour yourself out on behalf of others, to accurately reflect our God's heart in this world—what an honor. What a privilege.

Kay Warren is the author of Dangerous Surrender: What Happens When You Say Yes to God (Zondervan). For more information about her work, go to www.Purposedriven.com/hivaids. This is an abridged version of an interview that was first published in the May/June 2006 issue of TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN.

Reflect

◦ *It's tempting to look at Kay's story and the significant work she's doing and dismiss it because, after all, she's part of a huge church and has a well-known name. But in reality, she is a woman just like each of us; that isn't changed by the size of her church or her husband's success or the media spotlight. What do you find most inspiring about Kay's story? Which aspects of her journey to discovery of God's dreams for her do you most relate to? Why?*

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- *When God first caught Kay's attention about the issue of HIV, she felt deep compassion but she also told God "[T]here's nothing I can do!" Are there any big issues, needs, or crises that call out to your heart but about which you feel you're powerless to actually do anything? If so, what are they? What makes you feel powerless?*
- *Looking back, Kay can see that God was planting the seeds for this calling throughout her life, but they were "buried" by feelings of inadequacy and busy circumstances during the child-rearing season of her life. What feelings or circumstances may be burying the seeds of your dreams? Which of these are legitimate reasons to put dreams on hold—and which are not legitimate?*



Go Ahead—Dream

You'll be surprised at what God will do!

By Stacey Padrick

When I was a child, I owned a plaque that pictured a kitten on a rock gazing up at a golden butterfly. Its caption read, "Set aside some dreaming time." While I loved the photo, I always thought of a dreamer as someone with her head in the clouds—forgetting the real world around her. So when I entered college, I left dreaming to the philosophy students. It seemed impractical in the real world of limited resources, changing job markets, and fierce competition. I stuck to what could be measured and graphed—often putting myself and God in a box.

But several years ago, I was diagnosed with systemic lupus, which turned my "real world" upside down. Physically weakened and highly susceptible to viruses, I had to withdraw from activities, and some of my deepest desires no longer seemed possible. As my hopes for the

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future evaporated, I had to start trusting God with my aspirations. And as I began to trust, to my surprise, I sensed God beckoning me to start dreaming about doing things seemingly unrelated to my education and training, dreams that may seem insignificant in others' eyes. But these dreams—learning to swing dance, writing a book, leading a missions trip to Asia, and more—make my heart sing. I've allowed God to take me from my comfort zone and do "immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us" (Ephesians 3:20).

Do you limit yourself to what's possible? Practical? Acceptable? Do you find it difficult to allow yourself to dream? The following ideas will help you begin to listen to your heart's desires.

Preface your planning with prayer. Ask God to grant you wisdom and inspiration, to open your eyes to a greater vision of your life and him. I used to hesitate to dream, wondering, *What if I dream something that isn't God's plan for me? Who am I to say what I want?*

Yet, as I'm growing in my relationship with God, I'm learning he wants me to be honest with him. God encourages us to pursue our dreams while we rejoice in him. "Delight yourself in the Lord and he will give you the desires of your heart" (Psalm 37:4). Pray God would reveal the dreams he's written on your heart.

A few years after college, a friend recommended me for an overseas graduate scholarship. Though I'd dreamed of an opportunity such as this for years, I hesitated,

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wondering if I should stay at the missions organization where I was working. The trip would be a lot of work, and I wasn't sure I was prepared for the challenges I'd face. Despite my reservations, I paid attention to this dream I felt God had given me. I applied, won the scholarship, and studied overseas. There God gave me abundant ministry opportunities to share his love with students from around the world.

Set aside some time. Find time to be alone in a quiet place—maybe a scenic spot you enjoy. Often nature can help us "think big" as we see the grandeur of God's creation. Even a quiet corner in a local library or cafe can provide an atmosphere for reflection. Bring a journal, pencil, and perhaps a book to stimulate your thinking. One book that helped me was *The Path: Creating Your Mission Statement for Work and for Life*, by Laurie Beth Jones (Hyperion). Another that may help you is *Follow Your Heart* by Judy Peterson (Cook Communications).

Let your pencil go! During a job search, I took out my pencil and began to list my dreams—even the wild and crazy ones: learning Chinese, hang gliding, becoming a missionary journalist. Exhilaration and excitement surged through me when I allowed myself to dream with abandon.

Let your mind and pencil go! Color outside the lines. Ask yourself: *If money, time, or background had no bearing, what would I dream? What activities give me a sense of being fully alive? What gifts do I enjoy using? What things do I do to bless my friends? What makes me feel as though I were made for this?* All these can be clues to help you detect and shape your dreams.

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My friend Tamara, whose parents ran a restaurant for years, has a flair for gourmet cuisine and entertaining. Friends often refer to her as "Martha Stewart" and rave about her food presentations. Encouragement from friends and family, coupled with much prayer on her part, led Tamara to open her own restaurant at the age of 27. Within two years, it was the most popular gourmet restaurant in town.

Silence the skeptic. As you pursue your dreams, be aware of skeptical, discouraging thoughts. For example, when I began writing, my inner critic immediately accused, *Me? Write? I can't write! Besides, I don't have anything of value to say.* By identifying your reservations, you'll be better able to discern whether dreams are from God, yourself, or Satan, who will try to deter you from God's plan.

Don't define your limits! Let God decide what you can and can't do. I've argued with God many times about my capabilities. I can attest that arguing only wastes time and obstructs blessings. God loves to work through weaknesses and apparent impossibilities. Truly, "with God all things are possible" (Matthew 19:26).

I wanted to do something adventurous after college, but when God opened a door for me to teach in China, I thought, *No way! I can't teach. I'm too young to teach at a university! I don't know a thing about China nor do I speak a word of Chinese!* Yet, trusting God, I finally stepped forward and went. That year was the most fulfilling year of my life.

Dream big about things that won't happen by your own strength and ingenuity, but only by the power and grace of God. We can never out-dream him!

Stand guard against dream-killers. Dream-killers lurk around every corner, ready to pounce just when you find the courage to begin pursuing your dreams. They take many forms, such as concern about others' opinions. Perhaps words spoken to you when you were young, such as "You're so shy," have kept you from dreaming about public speaking.

Although my father had always encouraged me in whatever I wanted to do, when I was offered a job as a writer and editor, he remarked, "I don't see you liking that type of work." In truth, he didn't see himself liking that type of work. I took the job and enjoyed it. God used it as an unexpected launching pad for my writing career.

Other dream killers can be imagined or real limitations (lack of time, ability, or training). For me, the daily challenge of living with an unpredictable illness threatens to disrupt my goals and extinguish my dreams. When my health unexpectedly weakens, I often must cancel plans at the last minute. Thus, I become fearful of making commitments and pursuing dreams. Yet, through this challenge, God teaches me greater daily dependence on him. Rather than relying on my strength and determination, I rely on him, knowing that without him I can do nothing. We all deal with some form of limitations, but they can't limit what God can do as we step out in faith.

Try bite-sized beginnings. If you find "dreaming big" difficult, start cultivating smaller dreams. My friend wanted to run a marathon before she turned 30, and she did it—but she started by running 2 miles a day.

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If you're afraid to pursue a dream, start with the first step, no matter how small. When Moses crossed the Red Sea, he first had to step into the water before it would part.

In the movie *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*, the hero teeters on the edge of a chasm separating him from the cave that harbors the sought-after holy grail. The ancient map says he must step forward, though there doesn't appear to be anything to support him from falling to his death. Yet, as he steps into the abyss, he feels something solid under his feet—a camouflaged bridge that had been there all along. Similarly, as we step out in faith, paths we never knew existed will open before us.

Be on the lookout. Look for ways God might be offering direction and guidance as you pursue dreams. A local church or community college may offer a class or workshop that provides insight or resources related to your dream. Also, talk with others involved in your area of interest. You'll be amazed how God makes connections and honors the risks you take.

While visiting a friend, I mentioned my interest in retreat ministry. She told me of a couple she knew in Virginia who'd just purchased a bed and breakfast/retreat center. They needed helpers to develop the ministry. Six months later, I was living at the B&B where I could learn hands-on about the ministry.

As we step out in faith to pursue the dreams God's placed on our heart, inevitably we'll experience setbacks and disappointments. As I write this, I'm still saddened by the loss of a long-held dream to lead a missions trip.

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After planning and preparing for a year, I had to forego the project at the last moment because of a downturn in my health. Yet in my disappointment, I continually claim the apostle Paul's words to the Corinthians, "We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair" (2 Corinthians 4:8).

God can work powerfully in our weakness or crisis because we're forced to trust him. We shouldn't wait until we "have it all together" to dream. Begin now, even in the midst of brokenness. My friend Tamara, who opened the gourmet restaurant, pursued that dream after her husband left her. As we entrust broken dreams to God, he'll release new dreams—and do more than we could hope or imagine.

So go ahead—dream! Whether your personality's practical or imaginative, your limitations real or self-imposed, your dreams grandiose or simple, set aside some dreaming time. Whether you learn to swing dance as I did, or aspire to do something life-changing, such as launching a new ministry, allow God to expand your horizon and use you to fulfill his purpose in your life.

Stacey Padrick, a freelance writer from the San Francisco bay area, is the author of Living with Mystery: Finding God in the Midst of Unanswered Questions (Bethany House. This article was first published in the September/October issue of TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN.

Reflect

◦ *When Stacey learned she had lupus, the dreams and plans she'd had for her life had to change. "[S]ome of my deepest desires no longer seemed possible," she writes. When have events or life circumstances changed your dreams or plans? For example, have illness, a marriage, a move, or having children changed the trajectory of your dreams? If so, how?*

◦ *Stacy writes that she soon began to feel God beckoning her to start dreaming in a different direction and she soon developed new dreams that make her heart sing. Part of the process of developing those dreams comes through considering some key questions:*

- ***If money, time, or background had no bearing, what would I dream?***
- ***What activities give me a sense of being fully alive?***
- ***What gifts do I enjoy using?***
- ***What things do I do to bless my friends?***
- ***What makes me feel as though I were made for this?***

Pick one of the questions above, think about it a bit for yourself, then share your answer. (And later, when you have more time alone, prayerfully journal about your answers to all five questions.)

◦ ***Read Philippians 1:6** then revisit the questions above. Based on your answers to those questions, what work do you sense that God has begun in your life? How is he working in your heart right now to draw your attention to it?*

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- *Silencing your inner skeptic is key to discovering God's dreams for your life. That inner skeptic inside all of us often leads us to severely limit our dreams by sticking to what we think is possible, practical, and acceptable. How has your own skepticism negatively affected some of your dreams? What's the difference between healthy realism and unhealthy skepticism?*



Dream Poppers

When others try to squelch your dreams.

By T. Suzanne Eller

We sat in the intimate living room with friends and family.

"I've been asked to join the Proverbs 31 Ministry speaking team," I said with excitement.

Proverbs 31 Ministries is a strong group of women who support, encourage, and mentor faith-filled women who write and speak. It was not only an opportunity to pursue my passion of mentoring, but I was tired of flying solo. I longed for the accountability and friendship that come from working with others who share the same dreams. I shared the benefits, and then mentioned that travel might increase by one weekend a month.

"You don't like your husband very much, do you?" one woman asked.

She was dead serious.

This was someone I care about and respect greatly. She aimed and my joy popped. In her eyes ministry was a negative to my marriage, despite the fact that that my marriage is one of the strongest that I know. Richard loves what I do and is my biggest cheerleader. Family is my first priority.

Can I be honest? I wanted to fight back. I wanted to tell her that she doesn't have the same opinion about other women who work away from home 40 hours a week. I wanted to remind her that my husband is pursuing a Master's degree and working full-time, and that she has never seen his dreams as a negative. I wanted to shout out that I'm in my home office 26 days a month, more than any other woman I know.

But it wouldn't have helped. And it wasn't the right thing to do.

Since I couldn't change her opinion, I had to change my response to it. I gently reminded her that 29 years of a happy marriage was the measuring stick of whether I loved Richard, and then let it go.

But this is a huge obstacle for many women. Where do you go to share the challenges, the joys, the frustrations, or the excitement of what God has called you to do? What do you do when someone doesn't get it?

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God is our ultimate Boss and Sounding Board. Our family is next. But don't forget that we need each other, too. I am energized when I meet with women who have the same love of ministry. For me, I find that in Proverbs 31 Ministries, or by attending trade conferences such as CBExpo or in networks such as Women in Christian Media. I may attend only one event a year. I may select only one e-mail group. I may choose only a handful of blogs to read—like Gifted For Leadership—but it feeds that side of who God made me to be.

Who is your support group? Is there a network of women with the same goals in ministry? And most important, what step will you take today to make that connection?

T. Suzanne Eller is an author, speaker, youth culture and parenting columnist. She's written several books, including The Woman I Am Becoming: Embrace the Chase for Identity, Faith, and Destiny. This article was first published online at www.GiftedforLeadership.com in March 2009.

Reflect

- *Ever known a dream popper? When has someone taken aim at a dream in your life? How did it affect you?*
- *In your opinion, what do you think motivates dream poppers?*
- *Who in your life can serve as your number one dream cheerleader? Who's someone you know who encourages you to follow God's leading in your life? How does that relationship affect you?*
- **Read 1 Thesalonians 5:11.** *Who's a woman you can encourage and build up as she seeks to follow God's dreams for her life?*



Dream a Little Dream

Make some lists with the Maker of dreams.

By Camerin Courtney

Do you have dreams? I don't mean the kind where you're in public in your underwear or you have to take a final despite the fact you've never been to class. I mean the daytime kind of dream where you stop the madness of life for a few seconds and think about what you'd like to accomplish by your next birthday or in the next five years.

One of the best pieces of advice I've ever been given was to make three lists: things I want to have, things I want to do, and things I want to be. These lists are supposed to contain everything from the trivial to the over-the-top. For example, my "have" list contains such things as owning an antique

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armoire, achieving flat abs (that's over-the-top for me!), and having a home where people always feel free to stop by and hang out. My "do" list includes taking a cooking class, setting my roommate up with a cool Christian guy, and reading through the entire Bible. My "be" list contains being debt-free, becoming a letter writer, and being comfortable sharing my faith.

While writing these lists can be a great exercise for anyone, it's especially helpful for singles. It's so easy for us to get tunnel vision, to see getting married as our end-all, beat-all goal in life. But there's so much more out there to see and do and experience, and there's so much more that God's wired in each of us that needs expressing, sharing, and celebrating.

It's been great over the years to cross a few things off my lists. I've purchased a cool pants suit (at least I think it's cool!). I've become an avid reader. I've traveled to Italy. God and I smile when I get to cross something off. And I praise him for another dream realized – no matter how big or small.

I've learned it's important to have a record of these accomplishments – especially on days when I feel stuck in neutral, as though I'm moving nowhere. On those days, I look first to the things I've crossed off, which energizes me to find a new goal among everything that's left.

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I've also learned it's important for us to have a record of our dreams – for the down days when dreams are elusive and the future doesn't seem to hold much promise. On those days I read every item on my lists and marvel at my creativity – for I know it is the fingerprint of God.

So join me already, will you? Sit down with three blank pieces of paper, a pen, and – most importantly – a big prayer to the Maker of dreams. Together you and he can find so many things for you to invest your life in besides seeking a spouse, struggling with single parenting, or dealing with a dating drought. It's amazing how much wider the world gets and brighter the future looks when you catch a glimpse of it through God's lens.

Camerin Courtney is senior editor of TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN. This article was first published online at www.ChristianSinglesToday.com in May 2000.

Reflect

- *Camerin writes about the "tunnel vision" that can develop for singles who see "getting married as our end-all, beat-all goal in life." Depending on one's life stage, we can all develop some type of tunnel vision, such as focusing on the goal of having children, returning to work, having an empty nest, or retiring. Do you have tunnel vision? Are there any "big dreams" or longed for future events that may get too much of your focus? If so, what are they?*
- *What's your reaction to Camerin's idea of creating a "have," "do," and "be" list? Have you ever written down some of your dreams? If so, what was the experience like? Would you like to create lists like Camerin's? If so, what items would you put on your lists right away? (If you can, set aside time today to start working on your own lists!)*
- *Camerin has found encouragement from reminding herself of dreams she's been able to accomplish. What dreams have come true in your life? What "have," "do," or "be" goals have you accomplished? How does it feel to reflect on these experiences?*



So, Who Are You?

The deep connection between your calling and your sense of identity.

By Amy C. Boucher

What would you say if someone asked you to state in a few sentences who you are? I wondered if the task was possible when asked to write this short piece on my calling. How could I articulate something so central to my identity—and without sounding presumptuous or egotistical?

You can be the judge. As you read, though, bear in mind that one's calling is tied inextricably to one's identity and is not easily stated. Like a diamond, one's character and personality have many different facets. And on the matter of conceit, we know that God is our source and the one who calls us to create with him; our goal is to answer his call. My hope in putting down a few thoughts is to spark a conversation on a topic that affects us all.

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Discerning my calling continues to be a process of discovery. As I learn more about myself and become more of a whole person, the vision of my life's purpose becomes clearer. To put it simply and somewhat generally, a central heart's desire is to help others become stronger, more committed followers of Christ. Professionally, I currently live this out through the pen, editing and working with materials that have a Christ-centered emphasis. Some works are designed to help Christians think deeply; others expose idols of our age; still others are devotional books.

At this stage of my life, the sphere of paid work is a central component of my calling. It should be underlined, however, that one's career does not equal one's calling; other aspects may complement or supersede it during different seasons of life.

Commit to spending six months thinking and praying specifically about your life purpose. Each day ask the Lord to give you discernment and direction about his plans for you. Ponder and think about your heart's desires. What motivates you? Fascinates you? Moves you? Look back at your life and think of things—activities, awards, projects, and so on—of which you are proud. Is there a connecting factor, motivation, or theme?

After praying, waiting on the Lord, keeping a journal, and exploring activities and areas of interest, talk to a trusted two or three others about what you have learned. Tell them the direction in which you would

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like to head. Ask them if your vision squares with what they know of you. Then listen to their words, asking God to highlight the truth and discard the rest.

As God's beloved children we are called and chosen to love and glorify him always. This is our highest purpose; this is our most glorious command. And we follow a Father who loves to lead us down the path to life—the road that will bring him the most glory and us the most fruitfulness, joy, and peace.

This article was first published in the Winter 1996 issue of RE:GENERATION QUARTERLY under the title "Called and Chosen."

Reflect

- *Amy begins her article with a profound question: "What would you say if someone asked you to state in a few sentences who you are?" Go ahead and take a stab at answering her question.*
- *In our culture, we often equate our identity with what we do. But Amy emphasizes that "one's career does not equal one's calling; other aspects may complement or supersede it during different seasons of life." How does your daily work interplay with your own calling? Are you in a season of life in which your career matches your calling? Or do you feel your calling supersedes your daily tasks? Explain.*

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- *Rather than a one-time decision, Amy feels that discerning one's calling is an ongoing process of discovery. How has your own sense of your calling changed throughout the years? How is your sense of purpose different today than it was 10 or 15 years ago?*
- *Amy suggests taking six months to prayerfully focus on discovering your life purpose. Is this something you'd like to do? If so, what do you hope you might discover about yourself and about God? How will you enlist others to help you through this process?*



Additional Resources



Books, Bible studies, and articles to help you further

Books:

Dangerous Surrender: What Happens When You Say Yes to God by Kay Warren (Zondervan, 2007; 352 pages).

Surrendering to God isn't easy. It can bring both joy and heartache. But it enables you to know God in a deeper way than ever before. When Kay Warren's plans for her future were suddenly derailed by cancer, she had a choice to make. She chose to surrender to God's plan—and she invites you to do the same.

Follow Your Heart—And Discover God's Dream for You by Judy Peterson (Cook Communications, 1997; 224 pages).

This book leads women to discover what motivates them, what resources they have to act on their motivations, and then to find out what activity/effort would lead to fulfillment of these dreams. Interwoven are the stories of women of faith who show what it means to trust God with their dreams, including the struggles they have had.

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Knowing God's Purpose for Your Life by J.I. Packer (Gospel Light, 2001; 396 pages). Hungry to know God's plan for your life? Author and theologian Packer says that's a sign of spiritual health. Here he combines Scriptures, excerpts from his books, and practical applications for 365 devotions to help satisfy your search.

Living a Purpose-Full Life by Jan Johnson (Waterbrook, 1999; 240 pages). Women crave a sense of purpose. They yearn to know that their efforts will impact other people's lives. God's call on a woman's life isn't meant to remain a mystery. More than a role, a spiritual gift, or a job she loves, finding her purpose is about knowing who she is: God's woman in this world. Within these pages readers will discover what purpose in life is, why they need it, and how they can find it.

The Path: Creating Your Purpose Statement for Work and for Life by Laurie Beth Jones (Hyperion, 1998; 240 pages). Jones combines powerful spiritual insight and inspirational, practical advice on how to achieve one's highest goals and potential in business and in life, discussing the three key elements of a successful mission statement and explaining how to fulfill a mission.

Pathway to Purpose for Women: Connecting Your To-Do List, Your Passions, and Gods Purposes for Your Life by Katie Brazelton (Zondervan, 2009; 256 pages). What is the connection between today's to-do list and

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God's ultimate mission for our lives? This how-to-guide, filled with true personal stories, provides stepping stones through the challenges of not only discovering your universal purposes but also discerning your unique purposes in this life.

Why You Can't Be Anything You Want to Be by Arthur F. Miller and William Hendricks (Zondervan, 1999; 256 pages). Based on the idea that every person is endowed from birth with a unique pattern of competencies and motivations, or giftedness, this book describes your Motivated Abilities Pattern (MAP) which indicates your personal giftedness and encourages you to pursue your unique calling and live a purposeful life that is highly productive and richly satisfying.

Bible Studies:

"Ephesians: You are God's Masterpiece," a six-week Bible study series from www.ChristianBibleStudies.com, available online at <http://biblestudies.stores.yahoo.net/epyouaregoma.html>. Through these studies, you'll explore God's desires for your life and will be equipped to live up to his high calling.

"Knowing God's Will" from www.ChristianBibleStudies.com, available online at <http://biblestudies.stores.yahoo.net/kngowi.html>. This Bible study will help you dive deeper into what Scripture says about God's purpose for your life.

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"Serving in God's Power" from www.GiftedForLeadership.com, available online at <http://biblestudies.stores.yahoo.net/seingopo.html>. Once you've got a sense of God's calling on your life, how can you best go about accomplishing it? This study will challenge you to rely fully on God's power each step of the way.

Additional Articles:

"25 Ways You Can Make a Difference!" by Camerin Courtney from TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN. Do you want to go out there and do something with your life ... but you feel unsure about a first step you can make that will really impact others? Check out these 25 ideas for ways you can make a difference today. Available online at <http://www.christianitytoday.com/tcw/2003/sep/oct/6.44.html>.

"The Audacity of Dreams" by Sally Morgenthaller from www.GiftedForLeadership.com. In this blogpost, Sally Morgenthaller encourages Christian women to dream beyond just our own interests and talents and to include God's vision of caring for those in need as a key calling in our lives. Available online at http://blog.christianitytoday.com/giftedforleadership/2007/06/the_audacity_of_dreams.html.

"Hearing God's Call" by Nancy Ortberg from TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN. In this article, Nancy Ortberg succinctly answers the common question: "How can I figure out what God wants me to do with my life? Available online at <http://www.christianitytoday.com/tcw/2005/mar/apr/6.18.html>.

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Additional Resources

"The Need to Please" by Kim Gaines Eckert from TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN. One of the biggest hurdles to living out our own unique purposes is the crippling desire to always please others. This article will help you think through when we *should* seek to please others, and when we need to seek to please God alone. Available online at <http://www.christianitytoday.com/tcw/2008/julaug/7.50.html>.

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