

Imperfectly
brave!

Imperfectly brave!

Encouraging women to let God redefine bravery once and for all

Whitney Putnam



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Chapter 1

IMPERFECTLY BRAVE



Before you and I get in knee-deep together, I feel like you need to know a few things. I am the girl who had a crush in fifth grade and deemed it necessary to write a six-page note confessing my love the very next day. When I taste something good or see something lovely, I can't keep my excitement inside of me. I don't follow the rules of friend making. Ever since I was little, I would shout to the other little girls in their mom's shopping carts, "Wanna be friends?" I still eagerly seek friendships, except it was cute when I was in pigtails.

When I listen to music on a Sunday morning, I often cry big, hot tears. Or if the song has any resemblance of a beat, you will find my family and me dancing in our kitchen. My passions besiege me. I used to apologize for this, but not anymore. I am slowly learning to fear God more than I fear people. Do you know how difficult this is in a world where fearing people and their opinions is laced into our very drinking water and is sprouting up all over our dry land? The goodness of Jesus has compelled me to drink wholly and completely of Him and let it spill over all the hard, cracked places. Even if it means awkward. Even if it requires hard things. And especially because it keeps me in His throne room.

I am learning, friends, to be brave. To be brave in the name of Jesus.

Out of a series of events that you and I will walk through, God moved my Michael and me from a mega-church in the city to a mini-church in the middle of the country. Every Sunday, I sit in my padded pew and I beg God to COME. This is my battle cry.

Awaken your people, Lord Jesus. Let us love you more than anything. Make us authentic believers in your courts. Shake the walls. Move mountains. Reign down your spirit. Wash us clean right here, right now. Give us full altar calls and even fuller lives.

A quick side note. I am currently serving in a Southern Baptist church—so can you even imagine? (I love my Baptist girls x 1,987,394, but we simply tend to be a bit more reserved, dainty, and put together.)

Hot mess = me.

In my gut, I ache for the church. I can't long for anything more. I want to see Jesus be so well-represented in my own life that it tears me to pieces—good pieces—but pieces, nonetheless. I hurt and cry and pray and wait for the church. I believe in us so much. Do you know that? Do you know how much people believe in you?

I believe in us so much that I know in the very tippy-top parts of my soul, change in our world will come from us. Yes—us. The world, with all of its cracked and dry places, is creaking for a love-drenched Savior. We get to bring Him to people. God's women are called to be the love-drench and to bravely represent Him in our world. The stipulation? Know Him well enough that brave is redefined and spills over, bringing reviving water into our world once again. You will be a part of the change, if you allow God to redefine you. The redefining will be hard and quite messy. It means actually detangling the world from the Word.

The problem is, no shortcuts to redefining exist. We all want to be world changers the easy way. We want the fast lane because this is America, and we all want to be skinny in ten days and diagnose

ourselves via WebMD rather than wait to see a doctor. Time is of the essence and ease is becoming a necessity.

Being changed beneath the cross, however, will take time and relationship. It means we get deep into our insides and work and fold and toss and reshape all those lies we believed. Being brave doesn't mean we hop out of bed today, work a little harder and talk a little louder and be a little nicer. I wish it were that easy. Being brave is getting into the dirt and digging our way back to the cross.

I find it is easier to be up front about redefining. It will bring up some stuff inside of us that we have all brushed under the rug. Getting up out of the mire and rubbing our eyes hard against the sleep in our eyelashes will not be easy. Being unraveled by Him and staying in His arms will not be our first instinct—although hopefully it will become one. In a world that is saying *do all the things*, we will need to silence the shouts and *do the one thing*—be with Him. Separating the world from Jesus and His ways will leave our hearts pounding a bit heavier, but if anything has ever been worth it—it is this.

Living a life redefined by God gives us a life full unto our deathbed. Yes, girls, it is time to redefine our lives by sitting with our perfume bottles poured out at His feet, all together—dainty or completely undainty (me)—touching His robe.

It is time for us to arise. It is time for us to taste again the goodness of the Lord and become the women of the church He is calling us to be. It is time. And the best news in all of this? We get to arise together. Oh, if you could only feel my heart stirring. It's a good stir—a God kind of stir—and those stirs hurt, but girl, are they worth it.

Love God Like Crazy

I didn't wake up one day wanting to be brave, nor did I ask God to ever redefine bravery for me. I had a holy ground moment, and I will keep running back to it, hopefully for the rest of my life.

I hope that at some point or even better—points—in your life, you have had holy ground moments. Moments that moved your heart so much you practically felt like you touched God. If you

have, please put it in a great big treasure chest and store it safe, but don't ever leave it locked up. Locked-up treasure does no one any good. If you haven't, I am praying right now that you have a burning bush, holy ground, take-off-your-sandals moment at some point while reading this book.

Oh, Lord Jesus, would you speak to your servant girls?

I recently had my second baby, Carter, and quickly understood that two babies under the age of two is a game changer. Carter wasn't the easiest baby, either. The girl has a voice on her that can pierce straight through the skin into the heart. She kicked and screamed while nursing. She did all the newborn things that are so incredibly darling, but also leave you longing for your bed. Regardless, we celebrated her little life because never has there ever been so grand a miracle as life itself.

Now with two babies, the biggest change for me was getting out of the house. I still break a sweat while getting into the car. There should genuinely be a cheering section for all moms who slammed a door with one kid safely secured in his or her seat. (Notice, I didn't say a well-dressed, fed, happy, clean kid. I said a child who is alive and well-secured. Basics are good for survival.)

While I was figuring out how to get out of the house, I decided that the girls and I would take a trip to visit Fern Frick, a dear widow who attends our church. I put a phone call into sweet Fern, and she said she could hardly wait to see the girls.

A little later, we made it out of our home and down the dirt road to Fern's home. The best part about visiting Fern is that when you drive up to her front door, you already begin to meet with Jesus. You take a left onto a gravel road, and rows of corn begin to sing sweetly to an overwhelmed soul. Trees wave hello and point to the right way, the slow way, the best way of life.

We pulled in and Fern was waiting for us. I could tell she had already been with Jesus. Her face radiated. Jesus does that. He radiates from the hearts that meet with Him. Since we had called earlier to say we would be stopping by, Fern spent the morning making sweet tea and getting out toys. Oh, to be a widow with a generous heart.

As I stepped out of the car, I didn't know my feet actually were treading on sacred places. But now I can see that the conversation that transpired between Fern and me led to my very own burning bush. So here I am sharing it with you because it was never meant to be locked away. Rather, burning bushes are meant to be gazed upon and unleashed until God is glorified most completely.

Fern moves slower these days, so the girls and I walked patiently behind her as she led us into her living room. I laid Carter on the floor next to wooden blocks and a pretend wooden telephone. Collins, my oldest, went to town playing with the plastic animals. I sank into a chair near the girls just like I used to at my grandma's house.

Fern offered me a sweet tea. How could I resist the generosity? After the pour and the ice clanking, Fern placed my cup on a coaster near the chair, and she proceeded to sit down beside me. We sat in silence for some time while we watched the girls play.

Fern broke the silence first. She looked at me and said words that began to rattle my soul.

"How did we get here?" she asked, looking at Carter.

I was actually a bit confused by her question at first. But then I realized as Fern gazed at Carter she was asking questions concerning our world. Fern knows that during the day I work at a pregnancy support center, where we are about grace and love and mercy. We let beautiful women, of all ages, see the little lives forming inside of them. We live in a culture where life is dispensable and abortions are happening every day. So what are we doing about it?

Again, there was more silence. How do you answer such a heavy question?

(*And before you close this book out of fear of the word *abortion*, would you just take a moment and flip to the back of this book to the appendix to understand what a pregnancy center does? I promise, I *guarantee*, in fact, that you won't be disappointed. Because whether or not you are pro-life, pro-choice, had an abortion or are quite ambivalent to it, I want you to simply know that every girl who walks through our door is extended Jesus's love. A pregnancy center is a place of refuge, not condemnation.)

As I sat and let her question sink further into my bones, I realized it went beyond a “pro-life” standpoint. Her question went deeper into our world, actually questioning how we have walked so far from God. You could tell the question was one she ponders while sitting on her couch reading her Bible, talking with God. Her question left my heart beating in short spurts, wading through the thickness of silence, longing for a God-answer.

Here we were—generations apart—but one question hung in the air that united us.

All those longings I have for the church that I spoke about earlier led me to the same question, “How did we get here, church?”

Where, church, have you been when the one nation under God has walked wildly away from such a proclamation? Were we too busy building our places and our spaces to get outside our walls? Have we been too scared to figure out how to fight in love? Have we deemed ourselves unnecessary to the current ways of our world? When have we been brave? Worse. Have we been brave?

Then Fern looked at me, knowing full well the answer. With her face still aglow, she said words that overwhelmed my soul. “We didn’t fight hard enough. We weren’t bold enough. We just weren’t brave enough.”

I don’t think I will ever forget this moment. I stared at this Jesus woman—this woman filled with wisdom in every crack and wrinkle of her beautiful worn skin. As I looked into her eyes, I saw a woman whose purity of heart came from the depths of her insides. Fern didn’t point fingers at anyone else. She didn’t say it was Mr. President. She didn’t say it was all those hippies. She didn’t blame it on a broken system. She didn’t throw around explicit advertising.

She pointed the finger where it hurts the most.

She pointed it back to herself.

“I wasn’t brave enough.”

After more silence, the words finally broke from my mouth, “What do we do? What can my generation do?” I almost pleaded

because somewhere this has to end. At some point we must step into the battle. At some point we need to start being brave.

And then she said it, the words that still echo in my heart: “We have to love Jesus like crazy.”

Yes, of course. It is the most simple and the most challenging sentence I have ever heard in my life. This is what happens on sacred ground. Sentences become mandates and mandates become passions and passions become calls.

The babies stirred as we continued to talk. Carter’s little fingers pierced through the crocheted blanket, and big sister hovered over little sister still not understanding her strength over the baby. We watched them play again as our words spoke about loving greatly again and being strong and courageous. We talked about Jesus being more than an addition to our Sunday mornings and our love for Him running deeper than absolutely anything in our lives—our kids, our jobs, our husbands, our homes.

Our love for Him radically redefines our lives. A redefined life radically changes certain places. A whole army of redefined women can quite literally change the entire world.

I want in on this kind of life.

There is only one way to get there, though. This battle starts and ends with loving Jesus. We are brave because we *love* Jesus. The solution is a radical love for a precious and perfect Savior. In a battle you have to love the one you are fighting for, or else it all just becomes strategy and rules. If you don’t love the one you are defending, the fight will lose its impact. Maybe that’s what has happened. Maybe over the years—over the generations—our love for God has weakened and our fight for Him has lost its punch.

The good news is that we don’t have to come up with a separate rulebook to start fighting again. We don’t have to sit at round tables to create new strategies for how to be brave. We don’t have to yell and argue and fight with one another, because the One we are defending has already told us the way. The only way—the greatest way—is loving Him.

What we have to do is step before the throne and get it all right again. We must see our insignificance to see His importance

and lose our battle cries to hear His tender whispers. We need to cultivate a love so deep that it creates a charge to fight for the things He loves. We must develop a love so true that it holds us together even when our marching orders seem overwhelming. And church, dear church, we can. We *can* cultivate this kind of love.

So ask yourself the question one more time, “How did we get here?”

The answer is more love story than it is war story.

In order to be brave in battle, we must be tender in love. This is redefining at its finest.

Love only begins, it only really matters, at the throne of Jesus.

I looked down at Carter and it washed over me again. I cannot have my very own daughter look at me when she is older and ask, “Mommy, how did we get here?” without an answer of bravery doused in love. I can’t look at her and say, before I asked the same question years ago and did nothing. I drove carpools, I went to church, I folded laundry and made dinners, but I never exited my comfortable places. I became numb.”

Honestly, I can’t do “nothing” anymore.

God is calling me. He is calling us, His women. He is calling His precious ones to remember the cross and to be brave—imperfectly brave—so when our babes look back at us we can say, “We were brave because He was brave first.”

As we dive into the stories God has written for us, it will become apparent that the only way to be brave is to start right at the cross, broken and desperate for our perfect Savior each and every day. He will redefine us. The only condition? We have to be willing to let Him. How do we do this? We have to love Him like crazy.

Before you turn the page, eager and willing, would you take a moment and “breathe in” this place? Glance around and feel the fire flicker from the bush. This is His time to make Himself more beautiful, and you get to join Him. The ground is rocky underneath our naked feet, but we are together and the fire will blaze before us.

Would you bow your head and pray with me,

Oh God, we know that it is time for our generation to be redefined and formed into an army of courageous women. Our hearts long for more of You. Our bodies need Your breath. Our eyes want to see You. We see the need to be brave, but our flesh is weak. Would You give us renewed strength? Would You put in our hearts fresh callings? Would You, Jesus? We are willing. We are willing to be redefined.

In your mighty Name we pray,

Amen

New Beginnings

So, here we all are—staring brave in the face. We aren't going to wake up redefined simply because we see the importance of it. Redefining bravery is a journey and all journeys have starting points. Mine started near a peacock farm. What can I say? We all have our humble beginnings; mine happened to be near colorful feathers, outspread in a blue sky.

While we are on the topic of peacocks, let me tell you a little secret.

Peacocks sound like wailing ladies when they are making noise. They sound like wailing, flailing ladies. Can you think about what that sounds like? Can you hear it? Now, picture hearing it from your porch.

Right. I never thought I would hear it either, but there I was, a twenty-six-year-old city girl sitting in the country listening to screaming peacocks. I didn't know it then, but those peacocks were my new beginning into my imperfectly brave life. There were days I would sit outside and stare directly into the sun. What happened? Years ago, I wanted a loft in the city with a city job and city things. I wanted furniture with straight lines and to eat sushi on Friday nights. I wanted Texas football and two-stepping in Texas dance halls. I would even settle for good Mexican food and *queso*.

So how did I end up with peacocks in my backyard? Well, I married this gem of a man, and soon after we were serving at our first church in Houston, Texas. Houston was a good fit. It is where women tease their hair. It's completely valid to say y'all after every sentence. Best of all, people just don't mess.

One day in the middle of our good Texas life, Michael looked at me and said, "God is calling me to be a senior pastor." I blinked hard, breathed deeply, and said, "Okay, as long as we get to stay here." I loved our little life in Houston. We were just getting into our groove. We knew where the best beef fajitas were, we loved our small group and we rocked a killer vacation Bible school. We were so comfortable, and now Michael felt called to be a senior pastor? We were just planting our roots.

Before I knew it, Michael was sending out cover letters once a day to churches all over the world. We were possibly going to serve in Norway or Australia or even Scotland. After a time of grieving, I began to get excited, but each day came with its disappointments.

Michael would come back from the mailbox defeated because within that six-month time period, he sent out one hundred applications and received ninety-eight rejection letters. Ouch. That hurt. My Michael, that man, had to be really brave on those days to keep moving forward when everyone else was saying no.

Then it happened. We got a "yes" and our "yes" looked so different than Texas. Our "yes" was in Liberty, Missouri (just outside of Kansas City) where I still haven't found a restaurant that has fajitas even worthy of my taste buds. Regardless, we went from a mega church with big lights and big parking lots to a normal size church on a hill just outside a peacock farm in the middle of the country.

Can I simply say God's brave looks a whole lot different than the world's brave? He was already redefining parts of my life, and I didn't even know it yet.

All I knew at that point was that being brave in the first moments of our new journey to Missouri looked radically different than being brave as the world would have it. The world would've never said to leave the comfort of good friends, good jobs, and good food. No,

the world yells and pierces through our thick air that comfort is the American Dream and quite possibly the Christian Dream, too. Its voice tells me that bigger really is better, and smaller really is lesser. If I am not smack dab on God's lap listening to His words, I begin to hear only the world's shouts, and all that shouting overwhelms the clarity of God's whispers.

This book is about listening to His whispers and allowing them to redefine our lives.

Your Beginnings

God is whispering to you, too. He created brave places and new beginnings just for you. In all of these new and brave places, you have holy callings. You have people to love, mercy to give, hands to use for creating, and feet made to run. I am here to tell you that you can be ridiculously, unashamedly brave.

You were made for this.

Yes, *you*.

You are thinking, Whitney, I am not cut out for this kind of work. I am going to sit you down and look you in the eye and say, "Yes, you are. This is how God made you. He died on a cross so you could live a life full of this kind of adventure. When you said 'yes' to Jesus you said more than 'yes' to heaven. You said 'yes' to not being ashamed of the gospel. You said 'yes' to sharing in suffering. You said 'yes' to making His name beautiful. You said 'yes' to a holy calling."

Therefore do not be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord, nor of me his prisoner, but share in suffering for the gospel by the power of God, who saved us and called us to a holy calling, not because of our works but because of his own purpose and grace, which he gave us in Christ Jesus before the ages began, and which now has been manifested through the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.

(2 Timothy 1:8-10)

For years though, the church has become somewhat of a machine. We are American after all, and we define a good life very differently than Jesus ever did. At some level, every woman has bought into various lies when it comes to our American dreams. Lies such as we are successful when we have big houses or cute kids or great jobs. We are worthy when we do something well. We are praised when we are seen as a near perfect person, like when we have the right clothes or the right gifts or the right way with words.

On the flip side, we believe we will be cut off if we fail. We can never be seen as dependent. We can't ever be open and honest because our insides are gross and writhing in pain. Nobody has time for that. Our carpools and clean houses and busy planners put Band-Aids over it all, and our smiles on Sunday mornings don't help, either.

Know who loves this? The enemy himself. Unfortunately, he has snuck himself into the church. We made church a production and in so doing, removed the Monday-Saturday holy pursuit of the Lord. The pastor has become such an icon that the people feel like they don't have the same authority. We are afraid of our own voices because they're not as polished or noteworthy. We are afraid of failing so we don't try. We see problems like abortion, homelessness, and sex-trafficking as too big, so we hand them off to someone who can do it better. Or we just aren't willing to give up our reputation to stand on the hard side.

As you start out in your new beginnings, think about the lies you believed. Women are the worst at this. Here are a few:

What if I fail in front of other people or in front of my church? What will they think of me?

If I pursue something in the church, does it still make me look successful in the world's eyes?

I don't have anything to bring. Not one single thing.

I definitely can't complete a project as perfectly as her. Why would I even try?

I'll just handle it myself. I don't need to let God in or anyone else. If I do, it simply won't be the same.

God is not a faraway God. He is with us always. Since He never leaves us, what do you think He does when we believe the lies? Can't you see Him fighting for you? I can. In fact, I can almost hear Him saying, "Don't you know who I am? Don't you remember, *"I Am. I will carry you. Go and do the hard things. Don't let the enemy win. Let me win. Would you please let me win?"*

And so we find ourselves in front of our Almighty God. If we don't step in and let Him do His thing, our lives will never be the adventure He meant for us. But, in order to get past the lies once and for all, we need to see what the God of the universe really says about being brave. It will look wildly different than our American dreams. This might seem disappointing to you, but I am here to tell you that our American dreams will always leave us coming up short. God-dreams will put wind in our hair again and pump our hearts full of passion. We will be like new women when we reach out and touch His robe. In order to move our fingers over the ornate fabric that dons our King, we will have to come back to the throne room and ask Him to redefine our lives.

Redefining Bravery

This book isn't designed to give you a strategic game plan to tackle new areas of your life. Unfortunately I can't fill in the blank.

I will be imperfectly brave by _____.

I can tell you that God wants us to be brave again. Our world desperately needs us to. And God is looking for willing servants who, by faith, trust in Him all over again.

What I can give you through these pages is how God can redefine us if we are willing. Together, we will take an in-depth look at our calls, as well as how He authored success, fear, perfectionism, worth, and dependence. We will tear them each down through the world's eyes and build them right back up in God's arms.

It's going to be messy, but because of the cross, we need to be willing to get dirt underneath our fingernails. Because of the empty tomb, we should be willing to replace the lies with the truth. Because He is coming back at any time, we should be wholly and passionately pursuing His work in whatever season we find ourselves.

I can't wait, friends. I can't wait to do this together. I look forward to the day that Collins and Carter look to me and ask, "How did we get here?" and I can say, "Your mommy was brave because God said I could be brave. I didn't do it perfectly, but I did something. I entered into the battle, and because I entered in, I want you to do the same."

Let's make sure our conversations in twenty, thirty, forty years reveal how powerfully God used His people and how His glory transformed our nation. So, whatever it is you are going through, this *can* be your new beginning. New beginnings are scary and uncomfortable. If you are anything like me, you might feel ill-equipped to be brave or to step into a new place. May I remind you there is power in Jesus, and His eyes are *set* on you.

Get Close

In the midst of writing this book, I celebrated my birthday in Coronado, California. I could just eat up this place with its darling homes and crashing waves. I always told God I would love to live near a beach. He moved me to the middle of the country. It's okay; He made others smart enough to create airplanes.

On this trip, I came out a few days earlier than my family to write and sit and enjoy quiet. I actually read a whole book and sat on the patio and ate without any interruptions. So many of my nearest and dearest are confused by my need for quiet because I seem all extroverted, outgoing, and happy when really, if I don't have quiet, calm, and aloneness, I erupt. It's ugly. Just take my word for it.

One morning during this mini-getaway, I slept in until the wild ways of 6:30 a.m. I lingered in bed and then moved my body to the porch. In quiet, I opened my Bible and read the Psalms. In quiet, I repented. In quiet, I spoke to my Savior. I could have stayed on

that porch all morning, but I decided to hit the ground running. Running in Missouri is far different than running near the beach, so I chose to take full advantage. I decided I would jog down to the beach and back with enough time to get to the French coffee shop and write for several hours.

I finally made it from the house to the ocean. The beach in Coronado has a sidewalk about a quarter mile from actual waves. This is where most people jog. The sidewalk is easier to put tennis shoe in front of tennis shoe. A few people make their way closer to the packed sand near the ocean, but not many. On my run that day, I felt God calling me to run closer to the beach. I didn't complain and turned my gaze to the waves.

I finally made it down to the place where the tide just washed over the sand, and I kept running at the same pace. There were a few joggers in front of me, and I fell into step behind them. Still, I could feel God saying, "Get closer. Stop following the others and get closer to Me." Again, I didn't complain and moved out of the path others had forged and pounded the sand with new footprints.

As I jogged, I asked God for one sand dollar. We have this thing with sand dollars—me and God. He knows I love them and see them as gifts from Him. I looked down, saw my reflection in the sand and several steps farther there it was—this *huge* perfectly formed sand dollar. I smiled and stopped jogging to pick it up gently. I thanked Him silently and went on my way. Then it all happened. One after another, I found sand dollars! I started scooping them up, one by one, just giggling out loud. At this point, I couldn't contain the joy.

Of course, God! Of course! If I would simply get close enough to You. If I would forsake the paths that seem best and run closer to You. If I would ask and then look for the gift.

I am not kidding when I tell you that I took a huge handful of sand dollars up to a secret hiding space, ridiculously euphoric about my finds. *Oh God, you blessed me enough.* I put my sand dollars in a safe place so I could finish my jog and walked back to the beach. And there again—sand dollars after every single step. I ended up with forty sand dollars. *For-ty.* I asked God for one.

There I stood, wildly drenched in God's love and ridiculously unashamed. I could have danced. I wanted to tell everyone what had just happened. In fact, I did. I stopped people to tell them how crazy it is to find this many sand dollars. I know—so weird—but this is what Jesus does for us when we get close to Him and obey. He brings over and abundantly more. Isn't this what we long for? What we hurt for? What we ache for in our bones?

I lingered at the waterline for a bit after I hid my second batch and just listened. At this point I didn't care about time or my schedule. All of my longings for the day were washed up—actually—at the beach. Then He started revealing to me the real gift—the gift of His message.

Daughter, just get close. Only listen to My voice. Ask. Look. Obey even when it seems crazy.

I am convinced that God washed those sand dollars up in the tide just for me, at a time I needed to know what mattered most. I had been wrestling with my flesh while seeking recognition in all the wrong places. I was looking for rewards by my own doing. There at that beach, He reminded me that listening to Him and obeying His voice is all I can do. He will bring the treasures and bring them so very willingly into my life—I must be doing *one* thing—just one. I must be near to Him. I must forsake all other paths and get ridiculously near.

The world will tug at us hard. It will pull even harder now because we are seeking the satisfying things—the things of God and God Himself. I want you to listen closely. Lean in. Would you lean in closer to me as I take your hands across the pages of this book? God is asking you to get close to Him. He wants you to run your path despite the paths of others. He wants you to look for Him and listen for His voice.

You can't be brave just because you want that kind of life. You simply cannot. You can't be brave by reading this book. We can talk about redefining bravery. We can even examine what God-brave life looks like, but only you can get into His courts. This book holds no

magic powers. This book serves as a vehicle to get you closer to God so you can go and live brave—fully and fiercely. God doesn't need any more powerful women. He doesn't win with stronger horses or with how fast and hard we run. God is God. In one breath, He can move mountains. In one point of a finger, He can shake the whole Earth. In one stomp of a foot, a whole universe can be created. He needs women who go into His courts, listen, and obey.

I'm praying that is exactly what you will do right now. Find Him. Look for Him. Get with Him. Sand dollars wait and full satisfaction in His courts. Would you pause here now and pray your very own prayer to God? He would love to hear from you. Lay it all before Him.

Dear God,

The Big Reno(vation)

You are invested. Hopefully by now you are stirred to a point of excitement, wondering, What will my sand dollars look like or what will my brave things be? You have been written into the threads of the giant tapestry. Your heartbeat to live this life is already deeply woven inside of you. That is why the ache is there. So let's hit the ground running

Fill in the blank:

I will be brave by _____.

It's hard, isn't it? This is when I wish God would send down a pigeon with a small note on it with life directions. I wish we could all look into a crystal ball and know what step to take next. The

good news is, He has something greater for us than a crystal ball or even a small pigeon that delivers us notes of good news.

Read with me Romans 12:1-2, comment added:

I appeal to you therefore, brothers, [sisters] by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.

(Romans 12:1-2)

The Greek word for renewing means renovating. Renovation means restoration, redecoration, refurbishment, and revamping. True confession. If the TV is on, it is either on HGTV or *Mickey Mouse Clubhouse*. Let's be honest, it is on *Mickey Mouse* seventy-five percent of the time, but the other quarter allotment has my mouth drooling over beautiful homes. (PS, Dear Chip and Joanna Gaines, Michael and I think we are best friends with you both and pretend to invite you to dinner. Sorry, it's a thing.)

However, HGTV's downside is what happens after I turn off the show. After watching hours and hours of renovated homes, I begin to develop fantastic ideas for my own home. In my brain, Michael and I can easily tear out a whole kitchen and insert a backsplash and paint everything, as well lay new hardwood floor, revamp our bathroom and have a reclaimed wood wall—all in a hard day's work. We won't need extra help. We will only have to run to the store once. Nothing will go awry. Our home will be made beautiful in one fell swoop.

Dear Michael, I am sorry.

Michael has to tear me away from my renovated home dreams and remind me of just how messy projects become. He tells me how ugly the job gets before it turns beautiful, and how you actually have to tear up parts of your home in order to get to the good stuff. It can take weeks, months, and years to come to a final product—only to be looking into the wing of another project.

And such it is with life.

As we redefine, we will be renewing our minds. Things will get ugly—just like that big fat renovation process. Think plastic sheets, wet paintbrushes, cabinets hanging from a hinge. It almost makes my skin crawl. Some of my redefining goes way back to the peacocks. Remember them? Well, the thing about peacocks is they are beautiful. You just have to get past the noise (and the smell) to see it. One of my biggest overhauls happened right next to the peacocks.

When Michael and I packed up to move from Texas to Missouri, the transition had its own beauty; I just had to get over myself to see it. I had this thought that Michael and I would go to this church on a hill, love people like crazy, and it would flourish and everyone would love us. I thought I would easily find a job and get settled. People *like* me, I thought. I work hard. I make people laugh. I can produce results.

How silly and self-absorbed, I know. I have my own issues. I am so grateful for God's grace because He could have—and maybe even should have—swallowed me up whole with that kind of thinking. But He didn't. Instead He taught me what desperate looks like because I found out real quick that my above, well-thought-out, highly-self-focused plan, was nothing like His plan. He needed to rip out a few closets (and bedrooms and bathrooms and floorboards). In fact, He decided to renovate a whole home, not just a side bathroom. For the record, those kinds of overhauls hurt and are quite lengthy.

This renovation had to do with dependency and my pride. Somewhere I began to believe I had the right to a great job. I worked hard. I was ambitious and driven. I was nice to people. I suddenly became all too reliant on my skill set. I had no second thoughts about being able to get a job in Kansas City—until I couldn't.

It took eight months before I could find a job in Kansas City. No one would hire me. Absolutely no one. Not the corner store, not the big office, not the schools, *not anywhere*. That series of rejections took me to the arms of Jesus. I can remember waking in the morning and walking into the oddly-formed small room on the side of our little house in the country. I first deemed it our prayer

room, and then Michael called it our engine room. I needed it to keep alive because I was no longer the little engine that could. It was only God that could get my wheels on the right track. Clearly I wasn't getting anywhere anytime fast.

Now, as I examine my life during that time, I looked less than brave in the world's eyes. God was stripping away parts of me in order to get me back to Him. He was taking away my personal pillars of strength, so that I would stand on his greater platforms of influence. I wasn't working a big-time job; instead, I was desperately hanging onto a man who died on a cross for me over 2,000 years ago. It didn't look pretty. I can attest to that. It was a lot of tears. A lot of forehead on the car wheel and slumped over shoulders. It was a lot of praying. The renovation process was tough, and I have battle scars to prove it.

God was calling me to live out Romans 12:1-2. It was here that He taught me my bravest life starts first by the renewing of my mind. My calling and search to live the imperfectly brave life God has willed for me starts with Him, not in my skill set, in my dreams, or in my resume. It starts by holding our Bibles so tightly to our hearts that the blood of Jesus and His stories settle deep into our souls.

I will never forget going to California for a wedding in the midst of this major reconstruction of my mind. My sister and I sat in a quiet booth over edamame and pad Thai while I told her how much I was struggling. The words tasted like sandpaper in my mouth. For a big sister to share with her little sister that she wasn't making it, carved holes inside of me. I told her how God was making me so utterly dependent on Him and that I was learning to trust His will over mine. She cried with me and our pad Thai waited.

Soon after this trip, God revealed to me the beautiful part of the renovation. After I had been stripped and torn and broken and shattered, He put me back together again. The final product is even more gorgeous than I could have imagined. God created an opportunity for me to work at a pregnancy center, to love girls well, save His babies, and raise money to keep its doors open. Now I don't work at a job for a paycheck, I work somewhere that has

actually taught me how and why we must be imperfectly brave. God really did more than I could have ever asked or imagined, but I had to be broken and shattered to make my way back to the throne.

The lesson: The product will be beautiful. The process will be lengthy and difficult. And then there will be another project, because if you aren't currently in one, you will be soon.

What is a redefining moment that stands out to you? Are you in one? Did you just leave one? Name all the feelings.

Then there is the part of the renovation process that just takes time. I know that there have been days, weeks, years that we opened His Word and heard nothing. Just crickets. The quiet makes us scream inside because we know we want to see all the injustices go by the wayside. We want our prayers answered now, not later. We can't do one more load of laundry while the hungry keep getting hungrier and while the evil keeps getting more evil. We watch the news and cringe. The streets feel wicked—we need more light.

The bottom line that ties us all together? We all want to live lives wrought with purpose, so we wait to hear a voice from heaven that tells us how to fight the battle. If you find yourself in a waiting period, know this. There is beauty in the waiting. We are all waiting on something.

The process of waiting is all part of the transformation. We will be transformed by the *renewing* of our mind. God doesn't just want our hearts, He wants to transform them. He doesn't just want our lives, He wants to revolutionize them. He doesn't just want our pocketbooks, He wants to be in them. He doesn't just want our calendars, He wants to overhaul them.

It's what He does and He is good at it.

Unfortunately, plenty of times in my life I wanted the shortcut to a brave life. I wanted the big job when it worked for my schedule. I wanted the perfect kid so it would reflect beautifully on my parenting ability. I wanted the pretty house without the work. I even wanted to lose weight while eating candy bars. Waiting is one big, gigantic problem in my fast-paced twenty-first century life.

Plenty of moments I wanted to be brave my own way or to be holy without spending time in His Holy Word. My life is speckled full of days when I wanted to be like Jesus but never spent time with Jesus. Worse are the moments when He speaks to me and I act in direct disobedience.

When we first moved to Missouri, I had this prideful assumption about the growth of our church. I quickly realized the whole plan of just showing up and being really nice wasn't panning out for us. Our church wasn't growing. God was just beginning the renovation project in us, but there I was, wanting the shortcut to a church that followed hard after God's own heart.

While I sat in the pews during those first couple of years, all I kept hearing from Christ was the word, "revival." I actually wrote it on my door. I chalkboarded my front door and wrote *revival*. (Bless you Michael, for certainly your whole home could be a giant chalkboard.) Sometimes you just need to be reminded in big, bold letters what Christ is saying to you, so it screams over the lies.

It was then that I took one imperfectly brave step and invited other people into my crazy. Not because my crazy was perfect or the only way, but I knew revival was coming and it would start with prayer. I invited other women to come and pray in my home and to start our weeks out on our knees in community. It was the one piece of obedience I could muster, even though I didn't know the rest of the plan.

This renovation plan for revival was going to happen through prayer, and it certainly wasn't going to happen overnight. Every Monday since then, women meet and pray in our homes. We pray before our weeks begin because we know we are desperate for God. We are few in number, but numbers never mattered to God—hearts

do. We pray for our pastor, we pray for our church, we pray for each other, we pray for our jobs, we pray for our kids, we pray to know how to show love, we pray for our marriages, we pray when secret sin is revealed. We pray big, bold, prayers because our God is the God of the universe, after all.

I am still waiting to see altar calls that are absolutely full. I am still aching to see lost people saved in droves. I am still waiting for Jesus to become compelling to our nation. But as we are waiting, we are praying for God to breathe. And wanna know the truth? We may never see the final product. It might be we are the generation of prayer warriors. Or we might be the we might be the generation that ushers in a new Great Awakening. We could even be the women who stand still as the trumpets blast Jesus' triumphant return. Whatever our place, while we wait, let us pray.

As we pray, God will give us what we need. He gives us the torch. He lights the stick. We simply become torchbearers. Once you taste what it feels like to carry that big stick of red-hot fire in your hands, you never want to go back. So we take our sticks with flames whipping out over the sky, and we touch them together so the flame gets bigger and brighter and redder and hotter. We stand together, girls, letting the fire consume us, redefine us, and ready us to quicken our steps in this world. As we stand side by side, flames dancing in our eyes, we begin to light up the place—one giant blaze that can't be contained.

This holy fire will destroy the old and come out with the new—one great big renovation. God's beauty won't be contained.

Peter

The Word is full of people who carried the torches and walked imperfectly brave lives. As I read the Bible, I often take great pause and think of how men and women stood wholly and passionately and fervently on God's truth. Some died for what they believed, some battled, some failed, and we watch God relentlessly love them.

For example, we see David, a man after God's own heart. Throughout his story, we find David with his humble beginnings

of slingshot and stone, David who became King, David who sinned with Bathsheba, David who faced consequences, and David who ushered in Jesus. David lived an imperfectly brave life.

Then there is Moses, who raised his eyebrows at God when told he would be the one to release the Israelites from Egyptian captivity. *Who me?* He wasn't strong in his own might, but he knew where his strength came from—the peaceful yet commanding River of Life. Moses dipped into the waters and up came his faith. His faith allowed him to raise a staff, speak before Pharaoh, and perform miracles. It allowed him to remain persistent. It even led to the promise of freedom for the people to be released between towers of water at the Red Sea.

We could invariably go over character after character in the Bible, but for consistency, the man we will study is Peter, the man with his crop of failures, his passion, his blunders. In all the Gospels we see this man passionately follow Jesus, yet fail because his weak flesh reveals itself periodically. Don't we all know how very weak our own flesh can be? Together we will stop and watch how Peter is called into his very own imperfectly brave life. We will discover Peter who walked on water, Peter who denied the Christ, Peter who spoke at Pentecost, Peter who became the rock, Peter who was ultimately martyred for His Savior, Jesus Christ. We will look into how this man understood the One he was walking with and therefore was molded and formed into one of the most dynamic men of the Bible. You want a leadership course? Peter is your man.

You have a dynamic place in the kingdom, too. Peter had to detangle the ways of the world with Jesus's message the same way we have to in our current millennium. There is nothing new under the sun. In fact, after Jesus rose from the dead, Peter was faced with much steeper consequences than we currently face in America. He was actually killed for his redefined life, *and heaven rejoiced because of it.*

Imperfect

Peter never lived out his earthly ministry perfectly. Neither did anyone written in black and white in God's Word, except for

Jesus Christ. Yet, what is holding women back from stepping into their brave lives is the fear of not doing something right (or some women would go so far as “perfectly”). We plan and track and coerce and manipulate our worlds so the outcomes will come out to our version of perfection.

We want the perfect kids, so we make sure they are in all the right places, with all the right clubs, and all the right grades. We want the perfect homes, so we search and spend and clean so another woman might mention how lovely our home looks. We want perfect jobs, so risk seems dangerous. We want control, so we hold tightly to our to-do lists. In so doing, we miss out on the very breath of God.

Fear is holding us at bay. We run around trying to control a world that is being sustained in space by a God who might just breathe today and topple all our upright dominoes. When we are unleashed to a standard of obedience rather than perfection, our lives will reflect the compelling love of Christ.

What would it mean for you to be unleashed from perfection?

God has never required a perfect home, perfect life, perfect kid, or perfect world to step into His courts. He only requires a pure heart. He only wants us to linger at His feet. He wants to give us the good portion. When we believe our lives will bring about great change because of our pursuit of perfection, we have believed the lie and we have lessened God. *God*. Heaven forbid, I stand before Him and He says in love, “Why did you try to subdue My ways?” God is not a manageable warrior. He will not fit into our tiny hands. Let’s remember who we serve.

Then the earth reeled and rocked;
the foundations also of the mountains trembled
and quaked, because he was angry.
Smoke went up from his nostrils,
and devouring fire from his mouth;
glowing coals flamed forth from him.
He bowed the heavens and came down;
thick darkness was under his feet.
He rode on a cherub and flew;
he came swiftly on the wings of the wind.
He made darkness his covering, his canopy around him,
thick clouds dark with water.
Out of the brightness before him
hailstones and coals of fire broke through his clouds.

THE LORD also thundered in the heavens,
and the Most High uttered his voice,
hailstones and coals of fire.
And he sent out his arrows and scattered them;
he flashed forth lightnings and routed them.
Then the channels of the sea were seen,
and the foundations of the world were laid bare
at your rebuke, O LORD,
at the blast of the breath of your nostrils.

He sent from on high, he took me;
he drew me out of many waters.
He rescued me from my strong enemy
and from those who hated me,
for they were too mighty for me.
They confronted me in the day of my calamity,
but the LORD was my support.
He brought me out into a broad place;
he rescued me, because he delighted in me.

(Psalm 18:7-19)

When we pursue perfectionism over Christ, we dilute the unimaginable works of an Almighty God. When we dig our nails into our lives for any resemblance of control, we are trying to tame a God who was never meant to be tamed. God won't be bridled. He

will always be moving. Whether or not we choose to move with Him is up to us.

Let's not miss out on what He is doing. We can step into the adventure if we actually live surrendered. When we live by perfection, we live a life of mediocrity. Although life feels well-ordered and planned, it is not the life God has for us. He has a life of wholeness and greatness for His people. Yes, the Christian life will be one full of difficulty and suffering, but it will also be one of power and freedom. We are a force to be reckoned with because of the One we know. God can't be watered down, not by our perfect pursuits and not by our desire for control. But we can miss where He is going if we cling more tightly to perfectionism than to Christ. All He wants is a girl after His own heart. This will be the bravest girl—the girl found in His courts.

How can you relinquish the pursuit of perfectionism for the pursuit of Christ?

Redefine + Unraveling + Commitment

In redefining and walking into imperfectly brave living, I pray that God unravels you and sends you into a life wrought with purpose. I hope that you begin to live with an ache in your insides. I long for you a battle cry to stir up at the back of your throat. Most of all, I desire that you will stay unraveled at God's feet as you live imperfectly brave.

Remember, brave doesn't look pretty. Brave isn't always standing on the front lines. Brave is often fighting really hard for faith with a box of Kleenex, under your covers and clinging to a mustard seed. It is closing your eyes and seeing the open tomb and declaring over and over again, "I believe, I believe, I believe."

Brave is resting and knowing that God's hand has thrown this mighty Earth into motion and that same hand will remain eternally faithful to His children. Brave is quietly apologizing and whispering our grievances. It is crawling up in arms and looking into eyes and saying, "I was wrong." Brave is getting back into the Word when it just doesn't all make sense.

Our bravest places might come from our darkest places, but doesn't that make us *way braver* when we take the battlefield? These brave things keep us in the fire. They keep us in His hands, gripped in His love.

God unravels us, so He can make room for Him. The unraveling can be painful as one strand pulls from the next, but it is necessary. Our wild God wants us to remain wildly attached to Him. Our bravest place will always be crawling back into our chairs, opening up His Word, and listening to His voice all over again. So let us not be fooled, girls, by people's newsfeeds and seemingly fantastic lives. Let us not think, I can't be brave like that. I can't fight the way she fights.

The greatest fight is the one fought in His arms. If you haven't been there in a while, it's okay, He will wrap you up so quick, you will be drenched in love. And if you have been sitting in His arms, let yourself stay unraveled. I actually believe that being unraveled is our most accomplished state of being. We cease striving when we are unraveled; we cease performing when we are unraveled. We actually realize our great worth when we are unraveled—because our greatest worth is when the Greatest One knits us back up again. We live our greatest, imperfectly brave life when we claw back to the cross and gain our treasure there. Our treasure is Jesus. He is the treasure for the entire world, and you get to be a part of bringing Him to the ends of the Earth.

Wherever you are, would you allow yourself to come undone across these pages? Would you stop and see yourself for what you are? You are imperfect. You are weak. You are broken. But, you are embraced by the Perfect, by the Strong, by the Whole.

Over the next pages, we will literally peel the world away from the Word. We will redefine our purpose, perfectionism, our worth, dependence, success, and fear. We have to if we would live

