

Church of the Small Things

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Church of the Small Things

The million little pieces that make up a life

Melanie Shankle





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Church of the Small Things

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To my dad:

This book is for you because you taught me what it means to love family and the importance of being faithful in all the small things that make life worth living. I am grateful for many things and at the top of that list is that you're my dad. I love you more than I can say and have always been so proud to be Charles Marino's daughter.

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Introduction

I've spent my whole life listening to the story in the Bible where Jesus feeds five thousand people with five small loaves of bread and two fish. (Thank goodness that crowd didn't know about being gluten free.) I've seen it depicted on flannel boards in Sunday school, watched it brought to life in movies about Jesus, and heard it taught from various pulpits a million times. Whenever and however the story is told, the focus is always on one of three things: (1) the disciples who didn't have faith in what Jesus could do, (2) the miracle of turning a sack lunch into enough food to feed five thousand people, or (3) the admirable character of the little boy who willingly offered his meager lunch. But you know who never gets a shout-out? The mom who packed that lunch in the first place.

Maybe she was in a hurry; maybe she just threw in those five small loaves and two fish and shooed her boy out the door, glad to get him out from under her feet for the day. If she was like me, she probably hadn't been to the store recently and even gave the fish a quick sniff, worried it might not be any good. Maybe she gave the bread a quick once-over for signs of mold, because how embarrassing would it be to have your kid pull out some moldy

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bread for lunch? No matter what was involved in packing that lunch on that particular morning, I'm willing to bet she wasn't really concerned or even thinking about how God might choose to use her boy's lunch that day. I bet she didn't wring her hands over whether or not that lunch might matter in the larger scheme of God's plans or wish she could do something on a larger stage in front of an audience of people cheering her on as she tucked that fish and those loaves into a basket, and she definitely didn't do an Instagram story about it. The bottom line is, she didn't do the glamorous thing; she did the faithful thing. She packed a lunch for her boy just like she'd probably done a million times before, and God used her small act of faithfulness to feed five thousand people. He also used her son, whom she'd probably admonished daily to "be kind and share with others," wondering if it was falling on deaf ears. She got tangible proof that day that her boy had actually been paying attention. If you're a mom, then you know that this, in and of itself, can feel like a miracle.

So maybe you can see where I'm headed with this mom and the lunch bag story. Sometimes the biggest things God does start out in the smallest, most ordinary acts of daily faithfulness. The things we do so often and with so little fanfare that we don't even think about them anymore. We can spend so much time wondering and worrying if we're fulfilling God's primary will for our lives. Yet, ultimately, God's will isn't about the things we achieve; it's about the people we become. Life is more about how he uses us to make a difference to the people who cross our paths, even while we are just going about our normal, sometimes boring, lives. He is a God who used twelve men to change an entire world. He is a God who clearly finds value where we tend to look and see nothing special. God's primary will for our lives

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isn't about a particular job or a circumstance. It's not about the city we live in or whether we're married or single. We are in God's will when we wake up with a willingness to go wherever he leads that day, to seek him in the ordinary, and to love and influence the people around us. Sometimes that can look a whole lot like packing a lunch.

Life is what is happening all around us while we're waiting for the thing we hope will give us some sort of inner peace, contentment, or joy. The problem is that when and if that thing happens, we usually enjoy it for all of three-and-a-half minutes before realizing nothing in us has fundamentally changed. Our hair still doesn't look like Connie Britton's and we're still not as funny as Tina Fey, and so we decide that maybe it's the *next* big moment that will finally make us truly happy. Meanwhile, we're ignoring the fact that we woke up that morning with air in our lungs, had a cup of hot coffee, and laughed on the phone with a friend. I once heard a teenage boy say as he worked at the concession stand at our neighborhood pool, "It's Saturday night and I've got a new pair of shoes—the possibilities are endless." I thought, *Yes! Let's embrace the wonder hidden in the ordinary—whatever the new pair of shoes might be—because these are the moments that are full of possibility and promise.*

Sometimes it happens when we're right in the middle of the daily grind—driving car pool, going to the grocery store, attending class, working in a cubicle, wiping sticky jelly fingerprints off our countertops, tucking in the kids, and packing lunches. One of those normally ungrateful children will hug us extra-tight and whisper, "You're the best mom ever." Or a friend texts to say, "I've been thinking about you." Or we crack up because our insane dog is jumping up repeatedly on the other side of the kitchen window.

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When we start to pay attention, we realize life is full of small wonders that can make all the difference in a day, an hour, or a lifetime. And those small moments are no less holy than the big ones. In fact, maybe they are more holy because it is the million little pieces of our lives that really shape the people we become.

In J.R.R. Tolkien's novel *The Hobbit*, the wizard Gandalf says, "Some believe it is only great power that can hold evil in check, but that is not what I've found. It is the small everyday deeds of ordinary folk that keep the darkness at bay." The true joy of life is found in the everyday. It's the moments that don't necessarily take our breath away at the time that often become the ones that matter most. When we look back on our days, we realize such moments are the very threads that make up the tapestry of a life. Taken together, these seemingly ordinary threads of joy, sadness, conflict, and laughter make something extraordinary. With every small thread, God is carefully and thoughtfully weaving a masterpiece.

We live in a culture that celebrates the big accomplishment: the touchdown, the Nobel Peace Prize, the student body president and the homecoming queen. But what if we made it a habit to embrace and celebrate the small? The meal delivered to a sick friend, our kids being kind to the new kid at school, volunteering a few hours a week at a nursing home, or helping someone in need? Savoring a lazy Saturday morning in pajamas, listening to the sound of your children actually getting along, piña coladas and getting caught in the rain?

I've lived long enough to know that often, the most memorable moments in life are the ones that sneak up on you because they weren't planned or orchestrated but are just the simple moments we'll eventually look back on and think of as golden. They are

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the things of love and parenting and laundry and marriage and what to cook for dinner—just life in all its messy, magical, mundane and marvelous glory. These are the holy moments that are Exhibit A in why I'm a believer in the church of the small things.

These are the stories that, on the surface, may seem like nothing big. Some are silly and some less so, but they are all about the little moments that together leave a legacy and light the way to show us what really matters. A life isn't made from one thing, one big moment, or one huge success. It's created moment by moment, often with pieces that don't look like anything beautiful on their own but are the very fabric of who God meant for us to become as we pack lunches, raise kids, love our neighbors, and simply be who he created us to be—nothing more, nothing less.

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Give Me a Casual Corner Suit and Get Out of My Way

Enjoy the little things, for one day you may look back
and realize they were the big things.

Robert Brault, *Round Up the Usual Subjects*

It dawned on me the other day that I've lived in San Antonio, Texas, for over twenty years and that I am forty-five years old. For those of you doing the math at home, that means I've lived here almost half my life. Speaking of math, I read the other day that there are three types of people in the world: those who are good at math and those who aren't.

Give yourself a minute to think about that.

The reality is, I have now lived here longer than I ever lived anywhere else, so I guess San Antonio should officially be my hometown. But when people ask where I'm from, I still say Beaumont, which is funny considering I only lived there for six years and have been gone for the last twenty-five. But I guess

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the city where you went to high school stays a part of your story forever—unlike your grades in high school, for which I am eternally grateful.

I ended up in San Antonio after I graduated from Texas A&M in the spring of 1994. I spent the summer living with my parents in Houston while I went on job interview after job interview, wondering who would be lucky enough to hire a young girl who'd graduated by the very skin of her teeth with a degree in Speech Communications and had a long list of accomplishments on her résumé such as:

September 1992—October 1992: Salesgirl at Limited Express

Assisted customers in choosing outfits for special occasions. In charge of folding and hanging new inventory.

(Not mentioned: Basically just stood around and danced to Sir Mix-A-Lot songs.)

July 1993—August 1993: Lifeguard

Responsible for the safety of patrons at the neighborhood swimming pool. Trained in CPR. Also taught swimming lessons to toddlers. (Not mentioned: Basically just sat in the sun and danced to Tony! Toni! Toné! songs.)

While I could sell myself pretty well in an interview setting—thanks to the aforementioned Speech Communications degree—I knew I was dead in the water if they asked to see my college transcript. (Warning to any college students reading this: your college transcript does tend to follow you around, so maybe you should put this book down and go study for that Physics 201 exam.) Anyone who figures out a way to fail Kinesiology 101 isn't exactly a star student, but in my defense, that golf class was

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dumb and held on way too many days that were better suited to lying by the pool.

I eventually found a job in San Antonio. I credit this to three things: (1) my ability to make myself sound competent, (2) my stellar Casual Corner business suit that screamed “professional career woman” because it was double-breasted, and (3) the fact that the manager who hired me was twenty-seven years old. At the time, I thought she was so mature and wise, but now I know people in their twenties are essentially infants and know almost nothing except what they’ve learned watching episodes of *Real World* on MTV. I realize *Real World* is no longer a thing, so I guess today’s version of it is *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*, and while I’d like to mock this choice, I can’t help but feel that my generation started us down the slippery slope of reality television to begin with, and I was one of the first to hop on that train.

Anyway, my first job was working as a contract employee at a local hospital, helping employees figure out how to invest their retirement benefits. Let me stop right here for a minute and ask you to please close this book and look at my picture on the back cover. If I look like someone who gave you financial advice between September 1994 and February 1996, I suggest you immediately have your investment portfolio scrutinized by a certified professional—and I offer my deepest apologies.

Here’s what I remember most about that job. My salary was \$9,500 a year plus commissions. You would think that the “plus commissions” part would have motivated me to spend more time working as opposed to going back to my apartment for long lunches spent watching the O.J. Simpson murder trial, but you would be wrong.

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Side note: When FX aired *American Crime Story: The People v. O.J. Simpson*, I was hooked. It was completely fascinating to watch a movie based on events you vividly remember, which validated for me that those lunch hours spent watching the real trial were totally worth it. Not to overstate it, but it's like I inadvertently made an investment in my future. John Travolta plays Robert Shapiro. Connie Britton plays Faye Resnick. You're welcome.

This also feels like an appropriate time to mention that my best friend, Gulley, was telling her husband, Jon, about a bird she saw in their backyard a few days ago. She correctly identified it as a "red-capped cardinal" and declared herself to be "an orenthologist." Jon corrected her that she meant "ornithologist," which is the proper term for someone who studies birds, but told her she is indeed also an "orenthologist" because that describes someone who has spent hours of her life watching a TV series about the murder trial of Orenthal James Simpson. And so, yes, Gulley and I are officially "orenthologists," and if that is wrong then we don't want to be right.

But back to the story at hand. The problem with \$9,500 a year plus the occasional commission check is that it doesn't go far. Especially not for someone who likes the finer things in life, like paying the telephone bill and buying groceries. Not to mention the realization that maybe someone who made a D in Personal Finance 201, was constantly overdrawn on her checking account, and felt like she was playing the lottery anytime she went to the ATM machine (Come on, big money!), didn't need to be in the business of offering financial advice to people who had actual money to invest. So I began looking for a better job in greener pastures like Dallas and Houston. This is probably the first time in history anyone has ever referenced greener pastures

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in the same sentence as Dallas and Houston because, while they are a lot of things, green isn't one that typically comes to mind. But while I was plotting and planning a job change and a move, something happened. In the words of Elvin Bishop, I fooled around and fell in love.

I met my future husband, Perry, several months before I graduated from Texas A&M. (You can read the whole story in *The Antelope in the Living Room*. Just look for a copy at your local garage sale.) I didn't realize he was also in San Antonio until a mutual friend mentioned it. Perry and I began spending time together mainly because each of us was the only other person our age that we knew in San Antonio, but then it slowly turned into more when neither of us was paying attention. All of a sudden, my master plan to move to another city didn't look quite as compelling. I still knew I wanted to make a job change, though, which is why when my manager pulled me into her office to offer me a promotion, I brilliantly chose to quit my job instead. This is what most career-guidance books and my dad would call a really dumb move. Consider this next sentence the after-school special portion of this book: "Never quit a decent job unless you have another one already lined up, kids."

In what should have come as no surprise, companies were not lining up around the block to hire me. My grade point average ensured that I was shunned like a leper in the twelfth century, and so I ended up with a temporary position in the human resources department at QVC. That's right. QVC, as in the home shopping network. My job was to call people on the phone who'd submitted an application and prescreen them to see if they were qualified enough to bring to the corporate office for an interview. This led to conversations in which I answered

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questions such as, “Is it a problem that I smoke a lot of weed?” or “I turned in the application for my brother. He gets out of prison on Monday; can he call you back then?” I wish I were joking. The only real upside to working at QVC (or “The Q,” as we insiders liked to call it) was the in-house store where employees could shop for deeply discounted items that had been returned by customers. But even that eventually lost its novelty, because a single girl in her twenties doesn’t have a great need for dolls from the Marie Osmond Collection or jewelry from Joan Rivers Classics, a fact I’d tend to forget when every time I got carried away thanks to all the low, low prices. (It was kind of like the feeling you get on an airplane when you are desperate and end up looking through the SkyMall catalog because you didn’t properly estimate how many *People* and *US* magazines you’d need to get you through the whole flight. That’s when your mind tricks you into wondering how you ever survived without an illuminated beverage cooler or a space-saving floor-to-ceiling shoe rack.)

Anyway, my stint at QVC led to job search desperation, and I sent out résumés everywhere and to everyone, but I knew my goal was to stay in San Antonio because LOVE. So I finally resorted to signing up with a corporate headhunter named Sasa Johnson in hopes that she might have better luck finding me a job. I went to her office for my first visit in my most professional Casual Corner suit. She was a petite woman with lots of nervous energy, and I immediately felt like I was in over my head. She scanned my résumé quickly, drumming her fingers on the desk the entire time, and then gave me a steely glance as she looked up and said, “I’m looking at your résumé. I see almost no job experience, no qualifications, and that you graduated from college with

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barely a 2.0 grade point average. I have to ask, what the hell have you been doing with your life?”

In all fairness, as much as it stung, it was a valid question.

It made me ask myself the same thing as I walked out of her office. It also made me decide to use a different corporate recruiter since it was fairly obvious that Sasa didn't necessarily believe in my potential. Ultimately, I found a job working for a local company that manufactured doors (SNOOZE), but a year at that job gave me much-needed experience and led to a job opportunity in pharmaceutical sales, which is where I spent the next eleven years of my life.

Let's talk for a minute about pharmaceutical sales. I had a love/hate relationship with it. The free car, the nice salary and bonuses, and the incredible health insurance were all huge perks. The days of hauling in lunches from Great China Inn, pretending to be an extrovert in hopes that the nurses would like me, and the constant worry over market share for my products? Not so much. To this day if I find myself sitting in a doctor's office waiting room, I can start to suffer from post-traumatic stress and feel like maybe I was supposed to show up with lunch for thirty from the Olive Garden as I wrack my brain trying to remember the difference between LDL and HDL cholesterol.

But as much as I joke about it, working my way up to a job in pharmaceutical sales was one of the first real goals I set for myself. People tried to tell me it was a hard industry to get into, and I should have majored in Biology (as if), and they only hire people who graduate from college with a 3.5 grade point average or higher. But I didn't let that deter me, because at that time in my life, I saw it as my own little cough and cold promised land. When I got the call from the hiring manager offering me the job,

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I realized for the first time what it meant to shoot for something that seems impossible and achieve it. As an added bonus, Perry proposed to me two days later. In the words of Charlie Sheen, I was #winning.

God used that feeling to remind me to trust his voice when, eleven years later, I felt him calling me to walk away from pharmaceutical sales and take a chance on trying to write full time. It seemed like an insane risk at that point in my life, but if you're reading this book then—SPOILER ALERT—it turned out okay.

The point I'm trying to make in this long, fairly uninteresting history of my career trajectory is this: For a long time, I really had no idea what I wanted to do with my life, so I spent years making decisions based on fear rather than taking a leap of faith to figure out what I really wanted to do or who I wanted to be when I grew up. It's what so many of us do, because society has ingrained that kind of thinking into us. We're supposed to go to college, get a degree in business, keep dating the same person, get married, have three kids, buy a house and a minivan, and call it good. It's the American Dream. Except who decided the dream is one size fits all? Especially the part about the minivan. I know they have those automatic doors that slide open, but nevertheless, NO THANK YOU.

Sometimes we get caught up in thinking that the thing God has for us is something huge but hidden, and we either have to work really hard to figure it all out or wait until he drops that thing in our laps like manna from heaven. I absolutely believe God has a plan and a purpose for our lives, otherwise we wouldn't be here. But he has also given all of us unique gifts—time, resources, money, hearts for service, athletic ability, intellect,

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music, or the dedication to watch all six seasons of *Parenthood* in just a few sittings—which means not one of our lives will look like anyone else’s life.

I spent many years wringing my hands over God’s will for me and worrying that I was going to miss the whole thing while I was selling doors for a door company or cholesterol drugs for a pharmaceutical corporation. What I realize now is that God used every one of those experiences to build my character, to teach me perseverance and dedication, to help me figure out my strengths and weaknesses, and to shape my perception of the world. He used those jobs to get me to San Antonio, which is where I learned to hear his voice when I was all alone, met my husband, figured out I loved to write, and am now raising my family. I thought it was all about finding a job and being a productive member of society, but ultimately it was God’s way of leading me to a home and a purpose.

Nothing is wasted when we view it through the lens of what God has for us in whatever life brings our way. It’s all a part of who we are and who he is making us to be. For some, that may be a public role on a big stage, but for the vast majority of us, it’s about being faithful in the small stuff: going to the grocery store, volunteering in our kid’s classroom, befriending the new girl, coaching a Little League team, showing up for work every day, being kind to our neighbors.

We need to look for God in the ordinary, everyday things, to pursue our dreams and live our lives and be faithful in the small things, because those are the moments that prepare us for the next thing. Pay no mind to the critics who want to point out how and where we might be falling short in the process. I’ve always loved this quote from Teddy Roosevelt:

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It is not the critic who counts . . . the credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood . . .

Or as Taylor Swift taught us, haters gonna hate, hate, hate, but I'm just gonna shake, shake, shake it off.

Or as Sasa Johnson so eloquently asked me twenty years ago, "What the hell are you doing with your life?" Because now I realize what she was really asking—in a not-so-delicate or tactful way—was, "Are you going to waste this one imperfect, yet precious life you've been given?"

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Things I Wish I'd Known in College

"I was really going to be somebody by the time I was 23."

Lelaina Pierce, *Reality Bites*

Every fall on Facebook, I see pictures of my friends dropping their kids off at college, and it always makes me want to curl up in the fetal position and bawl my eyes out. It also makes me speculate what it will be like someday when Caroline leaves for college, and I think it's probably best summed up in two words: HOT MESS. I have this mental image of her dragging me across the ground as I hold on to her ankles and cry, "Don't leave your mother!" Although the sane part of me knows she has to leave because otherwise, we might become like Big and Little

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Edie living with fifty stray cats in *Grey Gardens*, and that's not good for anyone. Maybe especially the cats.

1. It's really never a good idea to drink beer from a funnel.
2. I know Whataburger taquitos are delicious, but perhaps eating them every day at 1:30 a.m. isn't the kindest thing to do to your pants.
3. Those boys who seem like they could have real potential if you could just change a few things about them aren't going to change.
4. On a similar note, not one boy in the history of the world has ever quit calling because he's "scared by how much he cares for you." That's a lie sold by Meg Ryan and romantic comedies in general.
5. Contrary to your belief, you do need to learn how to use a computer, and email is going to take off as a viable form of communication.
6. You will never regret all the late nights you spent hanging out laughing with your roommates.
7. That bodysuit that snaps at the crotch that you insist on wearing with high-waisted jeans and a Brighton belt is a mistake.
8. Maybe you should actually attend class every now and then since that's technically what your parents are paying for every semester.
9. Choosing the right major really doesn't matter as much as just doing enough to graduate.
10. These four years (or five or six) (no judgment here) will teach you more about yourself and life than you ever could have imagined. And give you friends and memories that will still be some of your favorites long after it's over.