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Intentionally Rewriting My "Mom Guilt": A Review of Power Women

Abstract

"As a woman called to be a mother and a professor, the expectations of intensive mothering and gender ideologies left me feeling that I had fallen short."

Posting about the book *Power Women* from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<https://inallthings.org/intentionally-rewriting-my-mom-guilt-a-review-of-power-women/>

Keywords

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Disciplines

Christianity

Comments

In All Things is a publication of the [Andreas Center for Reformed Scholarship and Service](#) at [Dordt University](#).

Intentionally Rewriting My “Mom Guilt”: A Review of *Power Women*

Valorie Zonnefeld

March 1, 2022

Title: *Power Women: Stories of Motherhood, Faith, and the Academy*

Editors: Nancy Wang Yuen, Deshonna Collier-Goubil

Publisher: IVP Academic

Publishing Date: October 5, 2021

Pages: 248 (Paperback)

ISBN: 978-0830853069

In celebration of March as Women’s History Month, a month dedicated to reflecting “on the often-overlooked contributions of women to United States history” ¹, *in All things* highlights the important voices of female professors at Dordt as they review the book, *Power Women: Stories of Motherhood, Faith, and the Academy*. Each writer focuses her response on one of the four sections: Navigating Academia, Navigating Motherhood, Navigating Multiple Callings, and Navigating Support. This multi-perspective review emerged from a book read where over twenty female faculty joined in valuable conversations across Dordt’s campus.

God has gifted me with the ability to teach mathematics. As a professor, I feel His call on my life to use that gift to help others understand mathematics and flourish in their lives. God has also gifted me with three children and called me to be their mom. Parenting my three children has been a source of great joy. Unfortunately, along with the joy came a guilt that I didn’t anticipate. The seeds of this guilt started when I read my first parenting book, *What to Expect When You’re Expecting*. It was here that I first learned my shortcomings as a mother and how they could affect the child growing inside me. The message was clear: I was responsible for the healthy development of this child. This guilt only grew for me as questions came from friends and family: Will you continue teaching? How long will you take for maternity leave? Will you use cloth diapers? After my son’s arrival, the questions continued. Are you nursing? Are you scrapbooking? Visits to the doctor and more informational books added to the growing list of things that a good parent does: brush baby’s gums, disinfect the grocery cart, keep a strict sleep routine, read books daily. The expectations placed on parents are high, and each well-intentioned question felt like a judgement upon me. As a perfectionist, I felt shame that I could not “do it all” as a mother.

“Mom guilt” is not a new idea, and it comes from a healthy desire to be a great parent. This desire turns into guilt when the mother figure is held to unrealistic expectations. Having the opportunity to read *Power Women* with other faculty over semester break helped me realize the mom guilt that I carry and the value of connecting with others walking a similar journey. The book introduced me to the term “intensive mothering,” a common approach to parenting in the United States that implies that a mom be “fully present and fully giving, providing for every aspect of her child’s needs by utilizing every aspect of her own resources, whether mental, emotional, physical, or financial.”² The message of intensive mothering is clear: it’s never enough until a mom has given her all. This leaves moms feeling frazzled and loaded with a burden of shame as we reflect on where we fall short. This burden is compounded for moms in demanding professions such as the professorate.

As March begins, honoring Women’s History Month, it should be noted that this emphasis on intensive mothering has not only been adopted but also increased by both stay-at-home and working mothers in the past half century. Chan cites research from 2004 that reveals “mothers actually spent more time teaching and playing with their children in 1998 than they did in 1965.”³ Given the increase in mothers working outside of the home over these three decades, this shift towards intensive mothering is significant.

As a woman called to be a mother and a professor, the expectations of intensive mothering and gender ideologies left me feeling that I had fallen short. Choosing to work outside of the home only added to the pressure, as I didn’t want others to think my calling to teach signaled that I didn’t value my calling as a mother. Reading *Power Women* was a breath of fresh air, as I read of other professional women who navigated their multiple callings as faithful Christians. Kim’s chapter on the “good mother” especially resonated with me. I did not realize the unconscious ways that I had embraced the expectations of gender ideals and being the “ideal mother.” These ideals often left me feeling exhausted and carrying a load of mom guilt that God didn’t intend me to carry. Reading *Power Women* helped me learn “to accept that it’s okay for me to have limitations and needs of my own.”⁴

I found a much-needed grace for myself in Son’s chapter that has been freeing. Son recategorized how she viewed herself to a “female dad,” since “dads are held to a lower standard regarding parenting practices.” My goal in viewing myself as a “female dad” is not to do less, but to release myself from unrealistic expectations. This shift allows me to show grace to myself and carefully examine when I have overextended myself out of vain pride. If I view myself as a “female dad,” I no longer feel shame for not bringing Pinterest-quality cupcakes to the school bake sale. My homemade chocolate chip cookies still show support for the school and save my sanity. As a “female dad,” I would not have felt guilt for showing up to church with children who hadn’t combed their hair. Getting my family to church and investing in their spiritual development was more important than their mismatched socks or dirty faces.

After twenty years of parenting, I’m no longer fretting over dirty faces. I’m also slowly embracing the grace that God gives to me and that I need to show myself. The vows that my

husband and I made at the baptism of our children have become especially important to me in the past year. The second question asks, “do you promise, in reliance on the Holy Spirit and with the help of the Christian community, to do all in your power to instruct in the Christian faith and to lead them by your example into the life of Christian discipleship.”⁵ Focusing on our calling from an eternal perspective to lead our children to Christ reminds me what is more important than fancy cupcakes and matched socks.

1. <https://www.history.com/topics/holidays/womens-history-month>
2. Ch. 5, p. 86
3. Ch. 2, p. 38
4. Epilogue, p. 207
5. <https://www.crcna.org/resources/church-resources/liturgical-forms/baptism-children/form-holy-baptism-infants-and-young>