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But for the Grace of God: A Review of Power Women

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Abstract

"This was my plan and my calling—it didn't have to be everyone else's."

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/but-for-the-grace-of-god-a-review-of-power-women/>

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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](#).

But for the Grace of God: A Review of *Power Women*

Erin Olson

February 28, 2022

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

Editors: Nancy Wang Yuen, Deshonna Collier-Goubil

Publisher: IVP Academic

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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.

I picked up *Power Women: Stories of Motherhood, Faith, and the Academy* this Christmas break in preparation for a book study group I was participating in with many other female faculty members at my institution. I immediately felt seen and heard. The feelings of the almost constant struggle between my roles as mother and professor felt validated as I listened to each author share their own stories about managing the titles they wear, all while trying to thrive rather than just simply survive.

I’ve always known I wanted to have kids, and I always knew I wanted to work. I was sitting in my undergraduate Developmental Psychology course when the professor asked how many of the women in the course planned to keep working once they had children. Out of about 20 women in the class, only one or two other people raised their hand in addition to me. This surprised me, but at the time didn’t really give me pause. This was my plan and my calling—it didn’t have to be everyone else’s. As my local community reflected the same dynamics as my college class (mostly women choosing to be at home with kids), and now I had my own children, I began to question my previous confidence in my calling. Could I really do both things

well? Was I failing my children because I wanted to have a full and flourishing career? Was my career going to suffer because I had kids?

Part I of the book focused on the pull that many female academics feel as they begin to navigate the roles and responsibilities connected to being both a professor and a mother. A chapter titled “The Synergy of Lullaby and Syllabi” brought me back to those early years in my academic career when I was juggling being a new mother, taking on a new career, and saying “yes” to too many things because it was all so new and exciting, and I felt like I needed to propel myself into my new career with all I had. Similarly, this chapter reminded me of the struggle I’ve experienced as I have tried to be the best mother and professor I can be while often battling messages from my community and society that said this wasn’t possible.

Chan, the author of the “Lullaby and Syllabi” chapter, states, “My faith also causes me to give neither my work nor family supreme importance or too much importance in my life...thereby lessening the overbearing demands that come from ‘ideal worker’ or ‘ideal mother’ ideologies” (p. 49). Both my role as mother and professor can be seen as “sacred callings” (p. 49), and as such, I can free myself from experiencing the dreaded struggle for “work-life balance” because I’m not making one a more important role than the other.

With a perspective lens zoomed out, I nearly laugh aloud looking at my transitions over the years as a woman in academia. I made the switch from hospital social work to college teaching as a 27-year-old, wife of four years, and mother of a two-year-old daughter. My first position was a half-time (two classes and two full days a week) position in the department where I still teach. To supplement the full-time income, I taught as an adjunct professor at a local community college and led two classes there the other three days of the week, commuting over an hour for one of these jobs. Two part-time jobs, a two-year-old, and a husband who had just started a job in law enforcement. In addition, after just starting these teaching positions, I found out I was pregnant again and the baby was due at the beginning of June. I really didn’t think anything of being a pregnant professor, but I learned that I was one of the first to get this honor at our institution. Life was quite hectic and I’m not sure how we all survived—and yet, I feel like most of the time we were thriving. This was certainly by the grace of God and his hand in my story and my calling.

Years passed by, and I recognize how things changed for women in my academic institution and in myself. When our third pregnancy came as a surprise and my due date was February, I couldn’t imagine how taking a maternity leave in the middle of a semester would work. I found myself wrestling with being a mother *and* a responsible employee. My other pregnancy was perfect, because I could take my maternity leave during the summer and not inconvenience my employer or my (sole) colleague in the department. I was plagued with worry about overwhelming my colleagues (there were two and a half of us now). During this pregnancy and my fourth year of teaching full-time, I was also applying for doctoral programs to earn that ever elusive “terminal degree.” My interview with a committee of faculty at the institution where I was accepted and from which I graduated, consisted of me sitting with my laptop strategically

positioned so that none of them would be able to tell I was obviously pregnant. I wasn't so much worried that my pregnancy would affect my admission, but more worried that it might taint or compromise their perceptions of me and my stage in life.

Now that I am further along in my career, I can shift my perspective and see how both of my callings are from God, and I don't have to make one more important than the other. This shift is something I wish I'd recognized much earlier. As chair for our program, made up of mostly professors who are mothers, I can use my own experiences and struggles to help my colleagues navigate these complicated and yet often joyful waters. Our department is one of grace and flexibility, recognizing that we're all at different stages of our careers and of motherhood. We work to support each other, and oftentimes provide some comic relief to the beauty and busyness that comes from managing multiple, yet equally important callings. My story reflects God's grace and continues to remind myself that this grace has helped me be more gracious to myself and to the other professor mothers with whom I am blessed to work with.