

Rachel Gerber, *Ordinary Miracles: Awakening to the Holy Work of Parenting*, Herald Press, Harrisonburg, VA, 2014. 152 pp. \$12.99. ISBN: 9780836198577.

When I began reading Rachel Gerber's book, *Ordinary Miracles*, I anticipated kinship. Like Gerber, I am a seminary-trained pastor, a minister who is licensed in the Mennonite Church. Like Gerber, I spent a short season of life as the full-time caregiver to one of my children. And like Gerber, I spent this season wondering (and sometimes complaining) about the wondrous, holy, often unbearably mundane terrain of motherhood.

Gerber writes during a time when the middle-class is experiencing heightened anxiety around parenting. The Pinterest-ization of motherhood is in full force in privileged, white America. We are in the era in which (and I am not making this up) some mothers labor over edible Elsa braids for lunchboxes while others are arrested for leaving their children to play alone at the park. Social media has invited a level of exposure and comparison that our foremothers could not have anticipated. The inventions of the suburbs and "school choice," predicated upon widening income disparity further deepen what are vastly different experiences of motherhood between those who have much and those who have little.

This cultural pressure makes it a difficult time to write an honest and forthright book about mothering. But Gerber doesn't pull punches. Instead of Instagram perfection, she shows us life in the chaos and the ordinary. There she waits for God to make it holy. As a mother I identified with Gerber, and was thankful for the reminder that I am not alone. Chick-fil-a dinners, mountains of laundry, and daily monotony are someone else's story, too. Not having it all together, being overwhelmed, questioning calling, yet finding God present even here – how good it is to know we are not alone.

In *Ordinary Miracles* Gerber describes her holy, chaotic, and blessed life. Gerber welcomes us to encounter the posture of prayer in folding laundry, the disappointment in pregnancy delayed, the trauma and terror of a car crash. Her book takes us through the quotidian of daily life as well as to those moments when we are disoriented by cancer, grief, and fear. Between these narratives Gerber returns to the story of the disciples on the Emmaus Road who meet the risen Christ.

In this review I focus particularly on questions that arose for me out of Gerber's narration of parenting. As I read I wondered, how did we get a book like this? When did motherhood get so complex? Have these questions of identity and vocation always been such profound struggles? Or has something shifted in our culture? What, in the way we perceive parenthood, has produced the expectations and hopes and fears that plot the map of parenting that both Gerber and I have been given?

As I read with these questions in mind, I stopped and turned to Bonnie Miller-McLemore's book *Let the Children Come*.<sup>1</sup> In it Miller-McLemore writes about the history of childhood, an interval of life "discovered" in the seventeenth century. At this time the Industrial Revolution pushed children out of specific household roles and into the public economy of textile mills and coalmines. After a horrendous era of exploitation, child labor laws and mandatory education removed children from work and, as a result, public life. Children could no longer participate in the economic upkeep of the family. Economically, they moved from asset to burden. They also became invisible to public life.

Yet, the results of this sea change were surprising. Miller-McLemore writes that, "ironically, the more productively useless children became and the less valuable in the 'real' world, the more emotionally priceless they became within the home."<sup>2</sup> The nineteenth century saw the rise of the "cult of childhood," an extension and deepening of the perceived need for a child to depend primarily upon her mother. Children moved away from relationships, mentorship, and apprenticeship among adults and into their own spheres of protection. Modern day age-segregated "Sunday school" is just one legacy of this change.

Gerber's book reads like a letter written from deep in the heart of "the new childhood." She speaks plainly of the anxiety that all mothers must navigate in this strange world where parenting is disconnected from the communities that previously raised our children. No longer integrated into the home economy, the redistribution of public and private space leaves the job of childrearing to lonely parents, tasked with making childhood "magical."

I was reminded that, despite her willingness to embrace the imperfections of motherhood, Gerber couldn't untangle herself from the primary expectation of contemporary parenting – that children should eclipse all other commitments and desires. I saw this in the way Gerber spiritualized housekeeping and children's games.

This was also evident in the guilt that lingered behind the narrative. In one chapter Gerber grants herself the Monster Mother Award, as she wonders about the fruit she's producing: "I haven't been showing well. I'd say I'm rather diseased and buggy; I have blight. Who wants that?" (39). There's this underlying sense that Gerber's inability to "get there" has to do with her spiritual attitude towards her vocation as a mother. If she would just play hide-and-seek for the millionth time as though Jesus was finding her. If she would just remember that laundry is another type of prayer. If she could just find the holiness in responding to her son's seemingly unending requests.

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<sup>1</sup> Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, *Let the Little Children Come: Reimagining Childhood from a Christian Perspective* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey Bass, 2003).

<sup>2</sup> Miller-McLemore, 6.

This is the bind of modern parenthood. Not only do you have to keep your children alive for eighteen years; not only do you have to morally and spiritually educate them; not only do you have to do this removed from extended family; you also have to love it, to find absolute meaning in it, to meet Jesus in it, to give every moment meaning.

When Gerber describes moments of self-reflection and personal growth, I was drawn into her accounts of reorientation to the ministry of presence and her willingness to return to the heart of Christ. At the same time I couldn't escape the feeling that both she and I are playing with a rigged deck. Could it be that the spaces we inhabit, the forms of childrearing we've been handed to us, the kinds of expectations placed upon us are untenable?

When I read Miller-McLemore, I can see how the transition from home-based economies to the sentimentalizing of childrearing has left us bereft of the resources and relationships upon which previous generations of mothers relied. Gerber's book is a snapshot of this strange new world of motherhood, an attempt to utilize spirituality as a compass to plot the way forward. Gerber attempts to find a way as a mother in this cultural moment when childhood is elongated, sentimentalized, and lonely, a time in which children are a market commodity yet have disappeared from public life.

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