

BECOMING A COUNTER-CULTURE MOM

By Dena Dyer, with help from her friends!



When he was four, our youngest son, Jackson, was snuggling beside me on our bed. After telling him a story, I got up to turn off the light. After I flipped the switch, I crawled back in bed beside him.

Without warning, Jax started crying. "Mommy!" he yelled. "Where are you? I can't see you! Turn on the light!"

So I immediately got up and turned a small lamp back on. "Mommy's right here," I said. "I'm not going anywhere." And as soon as he could see me, he quieted down and began to fall asleep.

Many of the people God places in our path (and some in our own families) are much like Jackson. They see a world full of darkness—wars, recessions, natural disasters—and wonder where God is. They feel alone and afraid.

We know that God is the light, and we have that hope inside us. With God's help, we can turn on His light for others. As Matthew 5:16 says, when I let the light of Jesus "shine before men," they will "see my good works and praise my Father in heaven." By sharing Christ's love, I point others to His life-changing, darkness-dispelling grace. How exciting that I get to be a part of changing the world through compassionate service!

One of my favorite scriptures is Isaiah 58:6-9. In *The Message*, it reads:

"This is the kind of fast day I'm after:

to break the chains of injustice,
get rid of exploitation in the workplace,
free the oppressed,
cancel debts.

What I'm interested in seeing you do is:

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sharing your food with the hungry,
inviting the homeless poor into your homes,
putting clothes on the shivering ill-clad,
being available to your own families.

Do this and the lights will turn on,
and your lives will turn around at once.”

This passage never fails to challenge, convict, and humble me. It reminds me that people all around me are hopeless, helpless, and oppressed. They might be my neighbors—a recent widow who longs for conversation, a verbally-abused wife who feels trapped by her circumstances, or a single mom with four kids whose money runs out long before the month ends. Or perhaps the hungry and homeless persons Isaiah is talking about live half a world away, and take the form of the children I need to sponsor through World Vision or Compassion International.

And we sometimes ignore the needy at their—and yes, our own—peril. In *Justice in the 'Burbs*, Will Samson writes, “It’s hard to convince the world that Jesus cares when we don’t...judging by our actions, it seems we would rather show up every four years and vote rather than show up every day to be the agents of God’s change in the world.”

Simply put, when I obey God’s call to serve, and I leave my comfort zone--whether financially, physically, or socially--to minister to the hurting, Jesus is honored. But when I read these verses, one sentence strikes me more than the others. The phrase “being available to your own families” never fails to penetrate my heart.

As long as I can remember, I've had a passion to bring His hope to a dying world, and throughout my four decades on the planet, He's graciously done so. I look back in awe and gratitude that He's allowed me to serve him as a summer youth intern, missionary, minister's wife, teacher, performer, author, speaker, and worship leader. But too much of the time, I've gotten caught up in a lie. Somehow, I picked up the idea that public ministry is more pleasing to God than the simple, hidden works of grace I engage in at home.

Especially in our current culture, busyness is seen as a badge of honor. Satan has convinced us that the busier we are, the more productive we are...and in the church, he has whispered the lie that working for God is the only thing that matters. We see this lie perpetuated by ministries and churches that require men and women to work sixty hours a week, many times at the expense of their family life.

When Carey was a youth minister and I stayed home with our oldest son (who was a difficult baby), he often worked that much. When I began to suffer from panic attacks and depression, Carey went to counseling with me and realized what a toll his job had taken on our little threesome. Thankfully, we both learned to say "no" more often, and we learned how to set healthy boundaries around our time, marriage, and children. But other families suffer for years with such unrelenting pressure—and it's no wonder that many of them end up in divorce court.

Attending four committee meetings a week—at night, no less—and participating in every volunteer project that comes along doesn't make God smile. It may make us feel like a super-spiritual servant (been there, done that—I'm definitely a "Martha" at heart!), but I believe it makes God sad.

By the way, even if you're single with no children, you need time to be still and listen to God. Don't get caught up in the pressure to do more than everyone else, just because you "have the time."

What pleases our Heavenly Father most is when we put Him first, listen to His heartbeat, and follow the unique path He's designed specifically for us. In some seasons of our life, the road may lead us to pour ourselves with abandon into our family—especially when our children are young.

There's a balance to all of this—one I haven't perfected, by any means. I consistently wrestle with the calling on my life to use the unique talents He's given me, because God has also given me the amazing blessings of a husband and two boys (ages 5 and 11). I know that they are my greatest ministry, and I never, ever want them to feel like they play second string to my other passions.

As we've worked through these issues, one conclusion my husband and I come to is that it doesn't have to be either/or. In fact, we want to involve our kids in the things God has laid on our heart--precisely to teach them how fulfilling a servant lifestyle can be. As they see Mom and Dad giving themselves sacrificially, they'll see our joy grow, and will feel its effects in our home.

Also, as we live a countercultural lifestyle, and keep the lines of communication open about why we're making difficult choices, our kids will pick up on both the "what" and "why" of our decisions. We want them to learn by both our words and deeds that they don't have to march in lockstep with the world.

As we continue growing into this lifestyle, we have discovered a few principles that work for us, and others that we've admired and/or adopted from friends. I pray they will encourage you and your family as you seek to chart your own brave new course.

Slow Down the Pace

As the pace of our society speeds up, sometimes the simplest choices become countercultural. Take regular family dinners, for instance.

A college buddy of mine, Laura Graves, says, "We try to make this a priority by limiting the amounts of activities for each of us. We don't enjoy daily suppers, but we probably make it happen at least three times per week. We believe that our family members can be a great encouragement and support to each other, so we choose to spend those times together."

Some decisions are tougher. In our small town of Fredericksburg, Texas, many of the families we've met have moved here, to get away from big cities, deliberately taking their kids out of the "rat race."

Andy and Andrea are one such couple. Along with their three children, they used to live in Dallas--both left high-pressure jobs in the big city in order to carve out a more family-friendly lifestyle. Andrea says, "We looked at where we would be financially in a few years, and we weighed that against the pace we were keeping, and we deliberately chose to move. It's been a sacrifice, but it's so worth it!"

They settled in our 'burg of 8,000 or so folks, where both Andrea's parents and her sister's family live. Now, her sister helps care for Andrea's smallest child when she has to work, and the family enjoys much more free time together—time that used to go

towards commuting, board meetings, and other activities. She also chooses to only work part-time, in order to be with her growing family as much as possible.

Cultivate Gratitude

I don't know if you've noticed, but the culture we live in is cynical, materialistic, and ungrateful. "More, more, more" blares from television screens and billboards. "I deserve it!" screams the box of hair coloring from the grocery store shelf. Courts are filled with people who are guilty but won't take responsibility, and the airwaves are crammed with people who will do anything (literally!) to secure fame, even for a moment.

How do we fight such overwhelming spiritual white noise? By cultivating gratitude and joy, especially about seemingly-insignificant gifts.

On her blog (www.aholyexperience.com), author and homeschooling mom Ann Voskamp began an online "Gratitude Community," in which she encouraged moms to post their lists of blessings on websites, blogs, or in private journals. The blog grew into a bestselling book, *One Thousand Gifts*, and has been featured in *People* magazine and on *The Today Show*, among other media outlets. I think this is a transformative idea—and so do the millions of people who have benefitted from the practice!

As a seasonal encouragement to gratitude, my friend Megan has a pitcher she puts out in November, placing a pad of paper and a pen nearby. All through the month, her family members write down things they're thankful for, fold them, and drop them in the pitcher. Then in a private family moment on Thanksgiving Day, the four of them take turns reading the slips of paper and giving thanks.

And in our family, we frequently have “Table Talk.” Around the dinner table, we take turns sharing specific actions from a family member we’re thankful for. For instance, Jackson might say, “I’m thankful that Mommy cuddled with me today after breakfast” or Jordan might say, “I’m thankful that Dad took me to get ice cream after school.” Some days, the actions are simple (hugs, a kind word) and sometimes, they’re profound—reminders of God’s grace, forgiveness and mercy on display in our little foursome. “Table Talk” helps us to notice the small wonders (which Ann Voskamp calls *endless gifts*) which God provides every day through the blessing of family.

Whatever way you choose to do it, I urge you to cultivate the fruit of gratitude with your children. It will make a huge difference in the tone of your home.

Teach the Truth—and Fight the Lies

In *Bird by Bird*, Anne Lamott tells aspiring writers, “Risk being un-liked. Tell the truth as you understand it. If you’re a writer, you have a moral obligation to do this. And it is a revolutionary act--truth is always subversive.”

The same advice applies to parents. Because the prince of this world has spread his lies so pervasively throughout our society, just telling the truth to our children is a revolutionary act. And as our children’s spiritual mentors, we must risk being unliked in order to raise them to follow Jesus. After all, if we don’t tell—and show—them how to do it, who will?

My dear friend Heather has thought long and hard about this principle. She and her husband noticed that they were feeding and clothing their kids well, and they spoke

often of the need for a good education and excellent character. But she wondered how they were training and disciplining their kids with regards to their faith.

As she pondered and prayed, God gave her the idea for a series of family nights based on the childhood game, "Truth or Dare." She came up with a twelve-week curriculum that shines the light on scripture as it directly relates to culturally-accepted lies (you are what you do, there are many ways to God, etc.). Each week provides a scripture verse, a memorable activity, and a takeaway principle.

Heather says, "In order to raise children to be discerning in our current world, I believe we have to give them Biblical truths. But as kids mature, they also need to learn the enemy's tactics in order to fight them off. As we teach our children scripture, and train them to recognize what the devil is daring them to believe in its place, we can set them free--knowing that they have been trained to be in this world, but not of it."

Raise Geeks—and Be Proud of It!

A few years ago, my eight year-old and his friend were having a sleepover. Over dinner, they began openly sharing with me about the cliques at school (which I couldn't believe had already started in third grade).

Drew told me candidly, "The cool kids are the ones who play football at recess, then there are the kids who *think* they're cool but really aren't, and then there are the nerds, who are so smart they're annoying."

Forcing back a grin, I asked the boys, "Which group are you in?" To which Jordan replied, "We're geeks. We're not cool, and we don't care!"

I couldn't have been more shocked—or happy. I gave the boys high-fives, and told them that I was proud of them for being their own person(s). And then I told them about Bill Gates, and how Bill—a bona fide geek—has become one of the wealthiest, and more importantly, most giving men on the planet. “Geeks and nerds will become the bosses of the cool kids one day,” I said.

The boys' eyes lit up as they grinned at each other and yelled in unison, “PAYBACK!”

True story (you can't make that stuff up).

But you might ask, why was I so excited to be raising a geek? Well, it's because as Jordan so eloquently put it, geeks aren't cool—but they don't care. I was a geek, and I married a geek. Carey and I weren't the “popular” kids growing up, because we didn't drink or do drugs, and we liked hanging with our families and going to church. We were able to stand strong in our faith, partly out of respect for our moms and dads, and partly out of fear of what they would do to us if we got caught partying (hey, I'm just being honest). But we're both profoundly grateful that we didn't get sucked into the party scene that would have made us “cooler.”

Author and speaker Marybeth Hicks is also passionate about this subject. She even wrote a book called *Raising Geeks: How to Raise Responsible Kids in a Me-First World*.

She felt compelled to write the book because she realized that lots of parents are making tough decisions—limiting media, teaching old-fashioned values—that are having an impact on their kids, and they might need encouragement and practical ideas. She decided GEEKS stands for “Generous, Enthusiastic, Empowered Kids” (I love that!) and

notes, “It’s a little countercultural, and that makes it difficult sometimes. Parents want to feel they’re not alone.”

Marybeth happens to believe—as do I --that today’s parents have a huge opportunity to improve our culture simply by improving the quality of parenting. She says, “Some parents think that if everyone in the 7th grade has a cell phone and a laptop and a Facebook page, their kids should too, even if they personally think it’s not entirely appropriate. The only way to take a stronger stand and protect our kids from exploitation, self-centeredness and materialism is to decide that we are the ones who know what is best for our children, and to have the courage to be different from the norm.”

Well said, Marybeth.

Be Choosy about Education

Part of raising a “geek” means making deliberate decisions about the way they’ll spend most of their days. We need to prayerfully consider whether we choose home, private, or public school for our kids.

Megan and John feel called to have their kids in public school, even though most of their friends have chosen private education. They have a seventh and a fourth grader. She says, “As more Christian families decide to attend private schools or homeschool, we became concerned about who was left behind. Increasingly the public schools are composed of broken families and families in poverty. We feel called to stay and to be salt and light.”

Their commitment strengthened about five years ago when John began working with Christian charitable non-profits. They realized that the families he serves have their children in local schools. Megan says, “If we wanted to be close to these families, then it meant we would allow our children to develop relationships with their children.”

After they had made their decision, a friend of Megan’s recommended that they institute a morning devotional time, in order to cover their children in prayer and to reinforce their values. Says Megan, “That was the most helpful advice I ever received! We’ve now been doing our Bible time for eight years, and it is a great opportunity to pray for friends and teachers, and to feed on God’s Word along with breakfast.”

Of course, there are challenges involved in every decision. John and Megan’s kids haven’t found many other Christians at the public schools, so at times their kids feel alone. Megan reports, “Still, we stay, because opportunities abound. Last year we were able to help a family who simply couldn’t pay the bills after having a fifth child. Kids that teachers have given up on are welcome in our home. The needs of our community are front and center. We learn about them every day when we ask our kids what happened at school.”

Maybe your family feels strongly that Christian education will best reinforce your values and equip your children to stand strong in a world gone mad. Or perhaps you’re convicted that homeschooling is the way to go.

Remember, every family is different, and our kids are all different, too. My acts of service will not look the same as yours; my child’s passionate pursuit of Christ will be different from your child’s. And my family’s education path will probably be different from yours. In our children’s school years, we’ve participated in both private and public

school settings (currently, we're part of a homeschooling co-op), and there are definitely positives and negatives with every kind of education.

So please, let's beware of judging each other about the educational choices we make for our children. If we're listening to Jesus, then He will tell us what to do, as well as how and when to do it. And hopefully, our children will come out the winners.

Turn off the Tube

Navigating the tricky waters of media is something my family constantly struggles with. We love movies, music, and television, and the boys adore video games. Carey and I enjoy surfing the Internet and using the computer. But my husband and I know that too much media (even the good stuff!) is not a good thing. So as the boys have grown, we've prayed, researched, and tried to set limits on both the time and quality of the media in our home.

Joe and Laura made a conscious choice to cut off their cable. It was a financial decision, but also a spiritual one. For media time, their three daughters watch videos, which Laura carefully pre-screens. "I realized one day that I would be accountable to God for all the things my kids saw when they were growing up," she said. "That really made me want to be more intentional about what I was letting them see."

They've been accused of sheltering their kids too much, but Laura disagrees. "I think you *have* to shelter kids in this day and age," she says. "All of my oldest daughter's friends have seen movies that she isn't allowed see, but I tell her that it's my responsibility to protect her, and I have to answer to the Lord. So many parents tell us, 'I

wish we could get rid of our television,' and I reply, 'You can! After all, you're the parent!'"

Both Laura and I agree that sheltering kids too much is better than being too permissive. And as our children have grown into the 'tween years, we've both realized that when we talk to them about difficult issues (abortion, the Holocaust, the Civil Rights movement), they are shocked at the atrocities and injustices in our world. They're not jaded and cynical—because we've protected them from being subjected to those kinds of horrors when they were younger.

Model a Servant Lifestyle

Just as not every family is called to homeschool or to private Christian education, not every mom is called to be a full-time stay-at-home mom. Some mothers feel called to work and use the talents they've been given to serve God in a unique capacity. Dr. Bray, a part-time pediatrician, says she has felt numerous times through the years that other Christian women have looked down on her for working outside the home.

She says, "There's definitely an assumption within the Christian community that staying home is best, and I do struggle with energy, and having to juggle a little. But for our family, it just makes sense."

She and her husband, Andy, an architect, often switch off childrearing duties so that one of them is with the kids. And her kids see that "the world doesn't always revolve around them—and that's a good thing."

Recently, Dr. Bray treated the child one of her friends. The toddler had fallen and cut his head, and the wound required stitches. She notes, "Andy was working, and I had

the kids. So there I was, having to go to the emergency room with three children under the age of seven, and God was merciful. It went great.” Andrea’s children were able to see her serving another family with her talents, and it made a “big impression on them.” It also reminded her that whatever’s she’s doing—at home or at work---she can involve them, showing them by example how to serve others.

Our family is passionate about servanthood, because we’ve seen the results firsthand. We try to involve our kids in others-oriented projects regularly—but more than that, we strive to make Christian service a way of life. Here are a few things we have done as a family, which may give you ideas about ways your own brood can make a difference. Some of them took more time and money than others, but they were all transforming.

- Raising money by means of a garage sale and a letter campaign, for a water well project in Africa;
- Making homemade Christmas cards for prisoners and shut-ins (we got the names and addresses from a local ministry) one Saturday morning during the holidays;
- Taking extra food/dessert to neighbors, especially when they’re sick, hurting, or new to the area;
- Inviting widows or single people to eat with us on holidays;
- Serving a Thanksgiving meal to the needy through a church ministry;
- Collecting towels for a local children’s home;
- Donating clothes, school supplies and toys for a soldier’s parents to send overseas (the soldier gives the goods to children in Afghanistan);
- Participating in “Samaritan’s Purse” shoebox ministry;

- Making cookies/cocoa package for friends and family members and delivering them while looking at Christmas lights and listening to carols;
- Buying McDonald's cards and/or care packages (granola bar, dried fruit, water) to give to the homeless people we see when we drive into the city;

Author Mary DeMuth has a lot of other ideas in her book, *Authentic Parenting in a Postmodern Culture*. She recommends going on mission trips together, talking about needs versus wants, and volunteering at places like AIDS clinics as a family. Many more creative ideas for family service projects can be found in the book, *77 Ways Your Family Can Make a Difference* by Penny A. Zeller.

A Biblical Example

Just as we can model servanthood for our children, both in the jobs we do and the ways we minister to (and with) them in our homes, in the book of Exodus, Jochebed modeled godly motherhood for us.

Pharaoh had given an order to his people to kill all the Hebrew boys, because he was afraid of the Israelites' growing numbers. Then Jochebed became pregnant, and had a boy. Terrified to lose him, she hid him for three months (think about how difficult that was for a moment—babies aren't the quietest of creatures!). Then, when she couldn't hide him any longer, she made a basket out of reeds and placed him in it, giving her daughter, Miriam, instructions to follow the basket downstream and keep an eye on her baby brother.

Certainly tears were streaming down her face as she kissed her baby boy, perhaps for the last time. Although this Hebrew mother was more than willing to give up her own rights (and perhaps, her very life) to make sure that her son was safe, I'm sure her heart felt as if would explode with grief.

As Pharaoh's daughter and her attendants walked down to the Nile to bathe, they found the baby in the basket. Miriam, who had been watching the whole thing, then stepped up and offered to get a Hebrew woman to nurse Moses. The royal daughter agreed. So Jochebed took her son home, and cherished the extra time God had granted her to serve him.

I believe that as she gave Moses milk, Jochebed told him stories about the God of the Israelites. As she rocked him to sleep by the light of an oil lamp, she rocked his world and turned on the light of God's love in his heart with songs of the Creator's goodness. When she soothed his tummy aches, she whispered to him about his heritage of faith. As she gave herself to Moses selflessly, knowing she would shortly have to give him back to the royal family, Jochebed filled his belly--but she also filled his head...with prayers and dreams, hope and courage.

We all know the rest of the story. God supremely blessed the bravery and resourcefulness of Jochebed. Many years after she risked her life to save his, God used Moses to lead His people out of slavery and into freedom. Without Moses, God would have had to use someone else to part the Red Sea, or receive the Ten Commandments. Deliverance would have come in another form, with another leader. It's simply unthinkable, isn't it?

Sure, Jochebed could be seen as simply a courageous nursemaid, but I believe she was much more. In God's upside-down economy, the small, daily sacrifices she made

eclipsed the big risk that she took. In faithfully serving her family's needs, Jochebed remained in the very center of God's will for her life...and it led to the liberation of her people. The light of the Israelites remained a bright, shining beacon, and God repeatedly displayed his power, mercy, and grace through them.

Who says changing a diaper doesn't change the world?

Quotes:

"History should teach us we are creating the kind of world today that our grandchildren will inherit tomorrow. Whether or not the gospel is bearing fruit and growing in the whole world is in some very real way related to how we act today. It is God who grows the field of the future, but we are participants who tend and cultivate that field." Lisa and Will Samson, *Justice in the Burbs*

"Living others first in a me-first world is countercultural. It goes against the grain of our self-focused society. It's taking the narrow road when the wide road would be so much easier. But the blessings of sacrifice come down to building character. As you give up the lesser desire for the greater good, an inner quality is forged. When you and I give up a momentary pleasure for a life-enriching experience, the quality of life is deepened until it creates within us a character trait of generosity from which to draw upon." Jill Savage, *Real Moms, Real Jesus*

“Belief in the Gospel is not simply a catechetical knowledge of its doctrine; no, it is an inner revolution. It is a decision to allow the Spirit to break our heart and to plant deep within us a new heart. When we express that new heart to others, it overflows with the truth and grace of the heart of Christ himself.” Peter Magee, *God’s Mercy Revealed: Healing for a Broken World*

Author bio: As a busy mom and minister’s wife, Dena Dyer constantly loses things—but she’s holding onto her sanity (barely). ☺ Her favorite forms of therapy? Talking and laughing with her sons, date nights with her hubby, reading, cooking, and watching movies. Dena is thankful for her creative life, which is varied and full. That doesn’t mean it’s easy, though...

“Jesus truly is my strength when I am weak,” she says. “His love, mercy, and grace have been incredibly instrumental in my life. That’s why I’m so passionate about sharing Him with other people, how- and whenever He allows me to.” In between helping her boys with homework and shuttling kids to karate and music lessons, she writes, speaks, and participates in the music and women’s ministries at Lakeside Baptist Church, where her husband serves as the Worship and Music Minister.

Dena’s publishing credits include the upcoming 2013 release, *Wounded Women of the Bible*, and other books: *Let the Crows’ Feet and Laugh Lines Come!*, *Mothers of the Bible*, the *Groovy Chicks’ Road Trip* series and *Grace for the Race: Meditations for Busy Moms*. Her articles have appeared in *Writer’s Digest*, *Woman’s World*, *HomeLife* and many other magazines, and her tips have been published in *Working Mother*, *Thriving Family*, *Redbook*, *Family Circle*, *Parenting*, *Nick Jr.* and *Scholastic Parent*. She currently serves as a contributing editor with The High Calling (www.highcalling.org).