

CAPTIVATING

EXPANDED EDITION

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CAPTIVATING

*UNVEILING THE MYSTERY
OF A WOMAN'S SOUL*

EXPANDED EDITION

JOHN AND STASI ELDREDGE



NELSON
BOOKS

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Captivating Expanded Edition

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To the captivating women we are
blessed to call our friends.

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INTRODUCTION

Rest assured—this is not a book about all the things you are failing to do as a woman. We’re tired of those books. As a new Christian, the first book I (Stasi) picked up to read on godly femininity I threw across the room. I never picked it up again. In the forty years since, I have only read a few I could wholeheartedly recommend. The rest drive me crazy. Their messages to women make me feel as though, “You are not the woman you ought to be—but if you do the following ten things, you can make the grade. Maybe.” They are, by and large, soul-killing. But femininity cannot be prescribed in a formula. There is no “one size fits all” pattern for God’s women.

We have women friends who love tea parties and china, and friends who break out in hives at the thought of them. We have women friends who love to bow hunt, scale mountains, and ice climb. Women who love to entertain and women who don’t. Women who are professors, moms, doctors, nurses, missionaries, dentists, homemakers, therapists, chefs, artists, poets, rock climbers, triathletes, secretaries, salespeople, and social workers. Beautiful women, all.

So—is a true woman Cinderella or Joan of Arc? Mary Magdalene or Oprah? How do we recover essential femininity without falling into stereotypes, or worse, ushering in more pressure and shame upon our

readers? That is the last thing a woman needs. And yet, there *is* an essence that God has given to every woman. We share something deep and true, down in our hearts. So we venture into this exploration of femininity by way of the *heart*. What is at the core of a woman's heart? What are her desires? What did we long for as little girls? What do we still long for as women? And how does a woman begin to be healed from the wounds and tragedies of her life?

Sometime between the dreams of your youth and yesterday, something precious has been lost. And that treasure is your heart, your priceless feminine heart. God has set within you a femininity that is powerful and tender, fierce and alluring. No doubt it has been misunderstood. Surely it has been assaulted. But it is there, your true heart, and it is worth recovering. You *are* captivating.

So we invite you to take a journey with us, a journey of discovery and healing. For your heart is the prize of God's Kingdom, and Jesus has come to win you back for himself—all of you. To help your journey, we've written *Captivating: A Guided Journal*. You might want to use it as you read this book. And gather a group of women and go through it together! We pray that God will use this book in your life, in your heart, to bring healing, restoration, joy, and life! And if God does that, it will be cause for a wonderful celebration. With teacups and china. Or paper plates. Whatever. One day we will all celebrate together. In anticipation and hope, may this little book draw you closer to God's heart—and your own.

Fifteen Years Later

It has been fifteen years since John and I wrote *Captivating: Unveiling the Mystery of a Woman's Soul*. The stories that have poured in over that time are breathtaking. What God has done for many, many women has been . . . glorious. He is setting his daughters free to be the women

they are created to be. He is transforming hearts and minds and lives and families and communities and nations.

There is more to be done. More to be known. More to be healed. More to be released. More love to receive and more love to pour out. People today are desperate for meaning. They long to know that it is possible to live a life that matters. They are hungry for truth and dying of thirst for the Living Water. There is no greater mission on earth than to be part of God's great invasion and bring it to them; bring Jesus to them! But first, always first, we must bring *ourselves* to Jesus.

I love the story in Mark 5 of the woman with the issue of blood who, out of *her* desperate need, pushes through the throngs of people surrounding Jesus in order to touch the hem of his garment and be healed. You remember how it went. She had been bleeding for twelve years. She had spent all she had on the many doctors and treatments available to her. None of it had helped. In fact, she had only gotten worse. Now, broke and heartbroken, she has an unlooked-for opportunity.

Jesus has come to her town. He is at this moment passing by. It is not lawful for her, a bleeding woman, to be gathered with other people. But she is dying. And she doesn't want to be. So against all odds and against the law, she presses *through* the crowd and presses *in* to Jesus. She reaches out with all the strength she yet possesses and touches him and is instantly healed.

Wow. Let that sink in for just a moment. She is instantly *healed*. This story is one of the lost treasures of the gospel.

The Bible tells us that Jesus never changes. "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever" (Heb. 13:8). Jesus still has the power to heal us as women, to touch *us*, to restore us in our places of deepest need. And we all have need. All of us. In fact, some of us have been bleeding much longer than twelve years.

What do you long for Jesus to do for you? What places in your

heart are crying out for healing? Where have you lost hope? What do you need to press into Jesus for?

We want to encourage you to do just that. As you read this book, ask him! Press into him! Ask Jesus to come for *your* heart. He loves to do that. In fact, it is why he came.



Stasi

ONE
THE HEART OF
A WOMAN

Sometimes it's hard to be a woman.

—**Tammy Wynette**

He saw that Fatima's eyes were filled with tears.

“You're crying?”

“I'm a woman of the desert,” she said, averting her face.

“But above all, I'm a woman.”

—**Paulo Coelho**

You belong somewhere you feel free.

—**Tom Petty**

Let's do it.” Dusk was settling in. The air was cool, fragrant with pine and sage, and the swiftly moving river beckoned. We were camping in the Tetons, and it so happened that our canoe was on top of the car. “Let's put in.” John looked at me as if I had lost my mind. In less than twenty minutes night would be upon us and the river and the woods. All would be pitch black. We'd be on the river, alone, with only a general idea of which way to go (down), where to take out (head for the road), and a long walk back to the car. Who knew what dangers lay out there? He looked again at me, looked at our young sons, and then said, “Okay!” We sprang into action.

The evening was stunning. The river's graceful movements caused

the water's colors to shift from cobalt to silver to black. No other person was in sight. We had Oxbow Bend to ourselves. In record time we had the canoe in the river; life vests securely fastened, paddles at the ready, boys installed, and off we went, a race to drink as deeply of as much beauty as possible, together.

An old wooden bridge hung low across the river; its broken remains looked as though they would collapse at the next strong breeze. We had to duck to pass underneath. Carefully, we navigated the winding channels of the Snake—John in back, me in front, our three boys in between, full of wonder and delight. As the stars began to come out, we were like the children present at the creation of Narnia—the sky so clear, the stars so close. We held our breath as one fell slowly, slowly across the sky and disappeared.

A beaver slapped the river, the sound like a rifle shot, frightening two ducks into flight, but all we could see between the darkened water and sky were the white ripples of their wake, like synchronized water-skiers. Owls began their nightly calls in the woods above, joined by sandhill cranes along the shore. The sounds were familiar, yet otherworldly. We whispered to one another about each new wonder, as the paddles dipped almost but not quite silently in and out of the water.

Night fell. Time to take out. We planned to go ashore along a cove closest to the road so we wouldn't have to walk too far to find our car. We didn't dare try to take out where we had put in . . . that would require paddling against the current with little ability to see where we were going.

As we drifted toward the bank, a bull moose rose from the tall grasses, exactly where we had planned to come ashore. He was as dark as the night; we could see him only because he was silhouetted against the sky, jagged mountains behind. He was huge. He was gorgeous. He was in the way. Blocking the only exit we had. More people are killed in national parks by moose than by

any other animal. Remarkable speed, seventeen hundred pounds of muscle and antlers, and total unpredictability make them dangerous indeed. It would take about two seconds for him to hit the water running and capsize our canoe. We could not pass.

The mood changed. John and I were worried now. There was only one alternative to this way out, now closed to us, and that was paddling back upriver in what had become total darkness. Silently, soberly, we turned the canoe and headed up, searching for the right channel that would keep us out of the main current. We hadn't planned on the adventure taking that turn, but suddenly, everything was required. John must steer with skill; I must paddle with strength. One mistake on our part and the strong current would force the canoe broadside, fill it, and sweep our boys off downriver into the night.

It was glorious.

We did it. He did. I did. We rose to the challenge working together, and the fact that it required all of me—that I was in it with my family and for my family, that I was surrounded by wild, shimmering beauty and it was, well, kind of *dangerous*—made the time transcendent. I was no longer Stasi. I was Sacagawea, Native American Princess of the West, a valiant and strong woman.

A Woman's Journey

I'm trying to remember when I first knew in my heart that I was no longer a girl, but had become a woman. Was it when I graduated from high school or college? Did I know it when I married? When I became a mother? I was forty-five years old when I first wrote this, and now at sixty there remain places in my heart that still feel so very young. As I think back on what would be considered rites of passage in my life, I understand why my journey has felt so unguided, uncertain. The day I started my period, my family embarrassed me at the dinner

table by breaking out in song, “This girl is a woman, now . . .” Hmm. I didn’t *feel* any different. All I felt was mortified that they *knew*. I stared at my plate, suddenly fascinated by corn.

The day I got my first bra, a training bra, the kind with stretchy material over the front, one of my sisters pulled me into the hallway where, to my horror, my father stood at the ready to take my picture. They said I would laugh about it later. (I haven’t.) Like so many other women I was left alone to navigate my way through adolescence, through my changing and awakening body, a picture of my changing and awakening heart. No counsel was given for the journey into womanhood. I *was* encouraged, however, to eat less. My father pulled me aside and told me, “No boy will love you if you’re fat.”

I joined the feminist movement in college, searching, as so many women did in the ’70s, for a sense of self. I actually became director of the Women’s Resource Center at a liberal state university in California. But no matter how much I asserted my strength and independence as a woman, my *heart* as a woman remained empty. To be told when you are young and searching that “you can be anything” is not helpful. It’s too vast. It gives no direction. To be told when you are older that “you can do anything a man can do” isn’t helpful either. I didn’t want to be a man. What does it mean to be a *woman*?

And as for romance, I stumbled through that mysterious terrain with only movies and music as a guide. Like so many women I know, I struggled alone through the mess of several broken hearts. My last year in college, I fell in love for real, and this young man truly loved me back. John and I dated for two and a half years and then became engaged. As we made wedding plans, my mother gave me a rare bit of counsel, in this case, her marriage advice. It was twofold. First, love flies out the window when there’s no pork chop on the table. And second, always keep your kitchen floor clean; it makes the whole house look better. I caught her drift. Namely, that my new position as “wife” centered in the kitchen, making the pork chops and cleaning up after them.

I somehow believed that upon saying, “I do,” I would be magically transformed into Julia Child. I imagined myself baking fresh bread, looking flushed and beautiful as I removed the steaming loaves from the oven. No matter that I hadn’t cooked but five meals in my entire life, I set about preparing dinners, breakfasts even, with determination and zeal. After two weeks of this, I lay on the couch despondent, announcing that I didn’t know what was for dinner and that John was on his own. Besides, the kitchen floor was dirty. I had failed.

My story is like most women’s stories—we’ve received all sorts of messages but very little help in what it means to become a woman and very little guidance as to what a real woman even is. As one young woman recently wrote us,

I remember when I was ten asking myself as well as older females in my life how a woman of God could actually be confident, scandalous, and beautiful, yet not portray herself as a feminist Nazi or an insecure I-need-attention emotional whore. How can I become a strong woman without becoming harsh? How can I be vulnerable without drowning myself in my sorrow?

There seems to be a growing number of books on the *masculine* journey—rites of passage, initiations, and the like—many of them helpful. But there has been precious little wisdom offered on the path to becoming a woman. Oh, we know the *expectations* that have been laid upon us by our families, our churches, and our cultures. There are reams of materials on what you *ought* to do to be a good woman. But that is not the same thing as knowing what the journey toward becoming a woman involves, or even what the goal really should be.

The church has not been a big help here. No, that’s not quite honest enough. The church has been part of the problem. Its message to women has been primarily, “You are here to serve. That’s why God created you: to serve. In the nursery, in the kitchen, on the various

committees, in your home, in your community.” Seriously now—picture the women we hold up as models of femininity in the church. They are sweet, they are helpful, and their hair is coiffed; they are busy, they are disciplined, they are composed, and they are *tired*.

Think about the women you meet at church. They’re trying to live up to some model of femininity. What do they “teach” you about being a woman? What are they saying to us through their lives? Like we said, you’d have to conclude that a godly woman is . . . tired. And guilty. We’re all living in the shadow of that infamous icon, “The Proverbs 31 Woman,” whose life is so busy I wonder, when does she have time for friendships, for taking walks, or for reading good books? Her light never goes out at night? When *does* she have sex? Somehow she has sanctified the shame most women live under, biblical proof that yet again we don’t measure up. Is that supposed to be godly—that sense that you are a failure as a woman?

Unseen, Unsought, and Uncertain

I know I am not alone in this nagging sense of failing to measure up, a feeling of not being good enough as *a woman*. Every woman I’ve ever met feels it—something deeper than just the sense of failing at what she does. An underlying, gut feeling of failing at who she is. *I am not enough*, and *I am too much* at the same time. Not pretty enough, not thin enough, not kind enough, not gracious enough, not disciplined enough. But too emotional, too needy, too sensitive, too strong, too opinionated, too messy. The result is *shame*, the universal companion of women. It haunts us, nipping at our heels, feeding on our deepest fear that we will end up abandoned and alone.

After all, if we were better women—whatever *that* means—life wouldn’t be so hard. Right? We wouldn’t have so many struggles; there would be less sorrow in our hearts. Why is it so hard to create

meaningful friendships and sustain them? Why do our days seem so unimportant, filled not with romance and adventure but with duties and demands? We feel *unseen*, even by those who are closest to us. We feel *unsought*—that no one has the passion or the courage to pursue us, to get past our messiness to find the woman deep inside. And we feel *uncertain*—uncertain what it even means to be a woman; uncertain what it truly means to be feminine; uncertain if we are or ever will be.

Aware of our deep failings, we pour contempt on our own hearts for wanting more. Oh, we long for intimacy and for adventure; we long to be the Beauty of some great story. But the desires set deep in our hearts seem like a luxury, granted only to those women who get their acts together. The message to the rest of us—whether from a driven culture or a driven church—is “try harder.”

The Heart of a Woman

And in all the exhortations we have missed the most important thing of all. We have missed the *heart* of a woman.

And that is not a wise thing to do, for as the Scriptures tell us, the heart is central. “Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the well-spring of life” (Prov. 4:23). Above all else. Why? Because God knows that our heart is core to who we are. It is the source of all our creativity, our courage, and our convictions. It is the fountainhead of our faith, our hope, and of course, our love. This “well-spring of life” within us is the very essence of our existence, the center of our being. Your heart as a woman is the most important thing about you.

Think about it: God created you *as a woman*. “God created man in his own image . . . male and female he created them” (Gen. 1:27). Whatever it means to bear God’s image, you do *so as a woman*. Female. That’s how and where you bear his image. Your feminine heart has been created with the greatest of all possible dignities—as a reflection

of God's own heart. You are a woman to your soul, to the very core of your being. And so the journey to discover what God meant when he created woman in his image—when he created *you* as his woman—that journey begins with your heart. Another way of saying this is that the journey begins with *desire*. The desires that God has placed into our hearts are clues as to who we really are and the role that we are meant to play. Many of us have come to despise our desires or at least try to bury them. They have become a source of pain or shame. We are embarrassed by them. But we don't need to be. The desires of our heart bear a great glory because, as we will detail further in the next chapter, they are precisely where we bear the image of God. We long for certain things because *he* does!

Look at the games that little girls play, and if you can, remember what you dreamed of as a little girl. Look at the movies women love. Listen to your own heart and the hearts of the women you know. What is it that a woman wants? What does she dream of? Think again of women like Tamar, Ruth, Rahab—not very “churchy” women, but women held up for esteem in the Bible. We think you'll find that every woman in her heart of hearts longs for three things: to be romanced, to play an irreplaceable role in a great adventure, and to unveil beauty. That's what makes a woman come alive.

To Be Romanced

I will find you. No matter how long it takes,
no matter how far—I will find you.

—Nathaniel to Cora in *The Last of the Mohicans*¹

One of my favorite games growing up was “kidnapped and rescued.” I know many little girls who played this—or wished they had. To be the Beauty, abducted by the bad guys, fought for and rescued by a

hero—some version of this had a place in all our dreams. Like Sleeping Beauty, like Cinderella, like Maid Marian, or like Cora in *The Last of the Mohicans*, I wanted to be the heroine and have my hero come for me. Why am I embarrassed to tell you this? I simply loved feeling wanted and fought for. This desire is set deep in the heart of every little girl—and every woman. Yet most of us are ashamed of it. We downplay it. We pretend that it is less than it is. We are women of the twenty-first century after all—strong, independent, and capable, thank you very much. Uh-huh . . . and who is buying all those romance novels?

Think about the movies you once loved and the movies you love now. It is only recently that there are movies for little girls that *don't* have a handsome prince coming to rescue his beloved. Yet, *Sleeping Beauty*, *Snow White*, *Cinderella*, and stories like them all speak to a little girl's longing for romance. She wants to be seen and desired, to be sought after and fought for. So the Beast must win Beauty's heart in *Beauty and the Beast*. So Mr. Darcy must walk across the field at dawn to proclaim his love to Elizabeth in *Pride and Prejudice*. And we sigh.

Isn't something stirred in you when Matthew finally asks Mary to marry him as the snow begins to fall outside Downton Abbey or when Edward, *finally*, returns at the end of *Sense and Sensibility* to proclaim his love for Elinor? "Then . . . you're not . . . not married?" she asks, nearly holding her breath. "No," he says. "My heart is . . . and always will be . . . yours."² Or how about when Jackson sings "Shallows" with Ally in *A Star Is Born*? Or the sunset scene at the bow of the *Titanic*? And we can't forget *Braveheart*, how William Wallace pursued Murron with flowers and notes and invitations to ride. She is captured by his love, riding off bareback with him through the majesty of the Scottish Highlands in the rain.

When John and I began to "date," I had just come out of a three-year relationship that left me wounded, defensive, and gun-shy. John and I had been friends for many years, but we never seemed to connect in the romance department. I would like him, and he would want to

remain “just friends.” He would feel more for me, and I would not for him. You get the picture. Until one autumn after he had become a Christian, and I was desperately seeking, our spiritual journeys, and the desires of our hearts, finally met.

John wrote me letters, lots of letters. Each one filled with his love for God and his passion for me, his desire for me. He spent hours carving a beautiful heart out of manzanita wood, then attached it to a delicate chain and surprised me with it. (I still cherish the necklace.) I came out to my car after my waitressing shift ended to find his poetry underneath my windshield. Verses written for me, to me! He loved me. He saw me and knew me and pursued me. I loved being romanced.

When we are young, we want to be precious to someone—especially our dad. As we grow older, the desire matures into a longing to be pursued, desired, wanted as a woman. “Why am I so embarrassed by the depth of my desire for this?” asked a young friend just the other day. We were talking about her life as a single woman, and how she loves her work but would also like to be married. “I don’t want to hang my life on it, but still, I yearn.” Of course. You’re a woman. You are made for relationship.

Now, being romanced isn’t all that a woman wants, and John and I are certainly not saying that a woman ought to derive the meaning of her existence from whether she is being or has been romanced by a man . . . but don’t you see that you *want* this? To be desired, to be pursued by one who loves you, to be someone’s priority? Most of our addictions as women flare up when we feel that we are not loved or sought after. At some core place, maybe deep within, perhaps hidden or buried in her heart, every woman wants to be seen, wanted, and pursued. We want to be romanced.

An Irreplaceable Role in a Great Adventure

When I was a little girl, I used to love World War II movies. I imagined myself being in them. I dreamed of growing up, braiding my hair, and

then tucking it up under my helmet. I planned to disguise my gender so that I could join in. Because back in those days, women were not allowed to fight. I sensed that the men in these movies were part of something heroic, valiant, and worthy. I longed to be a part of it too. In the depths of my soul, I longed to be a part of something large and good; something that required all of me; something dangerous and worth dying for.

There is something fierce in the heart of a woman. Simply insult her man, or her best friend and you'll get a taste of it. Insult her children at your own peril. A woman is a warrior too. But she is meant to be a warrior in a uniquely feminine way. Sometime before the sorrows of life did their best to kill it in us, most young women wanted to be a part of something grand, something important. Before doubt and accusation take hold, most little girls sense that they have a vital role to play; they want to believe there is something in them that is needed and needed desperately.

Think of Sarah from *Sarah, Plain and Tall*. A man and his young children need her; their world is not right until she becomes a part of it. She brings her courage and her creativity to the West and helps to tame it. We are awed by the nurses in *Pearl Harbor*, how in the midst of a horrifying assault they bring their courage and strength to rescue the lives of hundreds of men. The women in The Lord of the Rings trilogy are valiant and beautiful—women like Arwen, Galadriel, and Éowyn change the fate of Middle Earth. And what about women like Esther, Deborah, Mary, and Ruth? They were biblical characters who had irreplaceable roles in a Great Story. Not “safe” and “nice” women, not merely “sweet,” but passionate and powerful women who were beautiful *as* warriors.

Why do I love remembering the story of canoeing in the dark beauty of the Tetons so much? Because I was needed. *I* was needed. Not only was I needed, but like Arwen, I was irreplaceable. No one else in that canoe could have done what I did.

Women love adventures of all sorts. Whether it be the adventure of horses (most girls go through a horse stage) or white-water rafting, going to a foreign country, performing onstage, climbing mountains, having children, starting a business, or diving ever more deeply into the heart of God, we were made to be a part of a great adventure. An adventure that is *shared*. We do not want the adventure merely for adventure's sake but for what it requires of us *for* others. We don't want to be alone in it; we want to be in it *with* others.

Sometimes the idea of living as a hermit appeals to all of us. No demands, no needs, no pain, no disappointments. But that is because we have been hurt, are worn out. In our heart of hearts, that place where we are most *ourselves*, we don't want to run away for very long. Our lives were meant to be lived with others. As echoes of the Trinity, we remember something. Made in the image of a perfect relationship, we are relational to the core of our beings and filled with a desire for transcendent purpose. We long to be an irreplaceable part of a shared adventure.

Beauty to Unveil

The king is enthralled by your beauty.

—**Psalm 45:11**

Lovely little six-year-old Lacey was visiting our ministry outpost the other day, going from office to office, swinging on the doorframe, and asking with a smile, "Would you like to hear my song?" Her face kissed by the sun with charming freckles, two front teeth missing, and eyes dancing with merriment, who could refuse her? She didn't really care if she was an interruption. I doubt the thought crossed her mind. She sang her newly made-up song about puppies and kitties, fully expecting to be delighted in, then skipped down the hall to grace the occupant of the next office. She was like a ray of summer sun or,

better, a garden fairy, flitting from office to office. She was a little girl in her glory, unashamed in her desire to delight and be delighted in.

It's why little girls play dress up. Little boys play dress up too, but in a different way. Our sons were cowboys for years. Or army men. Or Jedi knights. But they never once dressed up as bridegrooms, fairies, or butterflies. Most little boys don't play dress up with Mommy's jewelry and high heels. They don't sit for hours and brush each other's hair.

Remember twirling skirts? Many little girls go through a season when they will not wear anything if it does not twirl (and if it sparkles, so much the better). Hours and hours of endless play result from giving little girls a box filled with hats, scarves, necklaces, and clothes. Dime store beads are priceless jewels; hand-me-down pumps are glass slippers. Grandma's nightie, a ballroom gown. Once dressed, they dance around the house or preen in front of a mirror. Their young hearts intuitively want to know they are lovely. Some will ask with words, "Am I lovely?" Others will simply ask with their eyes. Verbal or not, whether wearing a shimmery dress or covered in mud, all little girls want to know. As a young songwriter wrote,

I want to be beautiful
 And make you stand in awe
 Look inside my heart
 And be amazed
 I want to hear you say
 Who I am is quite enough
 I just want to be worthy of love
 And beautiful.

—**Bethany Dillon, "Beautiful"**³

A few summers ago John and I attended a ball at the beautiful, historic Broadmoor Hotel in Colorado Springs. It was a stunning affair. Black tie. Candlelight. Dinner. Dancing. You name it. The

courtyard where the hors d'oeuvres were served was filled with fresh flowers, flowing fountains, and the music of a gifted pianist. It was an evening long planned for. For weeks—no, *months* ahead of the affair—I, like every other woman who attended, asked the all-important question: “What will I wear?” (As the special night drew closer, I also wondered if it was possible to lose ten pounds in seven days.)

The evening turned out to be glorious. The weather was perfect. Every detail attended to and lovely. But the highlight by far was the women. Above the sound of the splashing water from the fountains, even above the music that floated through the air, was the sound of delighted exclamations. “You look beautiful!” “You are gorgeous!” “What an amazing dress!” “How lovely you are!” We were delighting in each other’s beauty and enjoying our own. We were playing dress up for real and *loving* it.

These women were normal women, women just like you and me. Women we would run into at the bank or the grocery store or the office. Women whose battles against acne have left their faces marked and their souls scarred. Women whose struggle with their weight has been the bane of their lives. Women who always felt their hair was too thin, too thick, too straight, or too curly. Ordinary women, if there is such a thing. But women who, at least for a few hours this night, took the risk of revealing their beauty. Perhaps better, whose beauty was *unveiled*.

Think of your wedding day—or the wedding day you dream of. How important is your dress as a bride? Would you just grab the first thing in your closet, throw on “any old thing”? A friend of ours is getting married in six months. Now, this young woman has seen her share of boys and heartbreaks. Her tale of beauty has many hurts to it. But as she told us about trying on wedding dresses and finding just the right dress, the weariness faded away, and she was radiant. “I felt like a princess!” she said, almost shyly. Isn’t that what you dreamed of?

One little girl, who is being raised in a home where her feminine heart is welcomed, told her mother about a wonderful dream she had.

My daughter Emma—nearly six years old—came to me all aglow this morning. She lay at my feet on my bed all stretched out as if she hadn't a care in the world. "Mommy," she said, "I had a wonderful dream last night." "What was it about?" I asked. "I was a Queen," she answered. And as she did her cheeks blushed pink. "Really!" I replied. "What happened in your dream?" "I was wearing a long, beautiful dress," she said with hands gesturing downward, flowing. "Was there anything on your head?" I wondered aloud. "Yes, a crown." "Hmmm, why was that such a wonderful dream?" "I just love feeling that way!" "What way?" And with a sigh she spoke one word . . . "Beauty." (Emma's dream, as told to her mother)

The desire to be beautiful is an ageless longing. My friend Lilly is in her mid-eighties. As she descended the stairs of her home one Christmas season, I was captured by her beauty. She was wearing a green corduroy jumper with a white turtleneck that had little candy canes all over it. I said, "Lilly, you look lovely!" Her face lit up, wrinkles and age spots disappearing as she put her hands out at her sides like a ballerina and did a delightful little twirl. She was no longer eighty—she was ageless. God has set eternity in our hearts. The longing to be beautiful is set there as well.

Now, we know that the desire to be beautiful has caused many women untold grief (how many diets have you been on?). Countless tears have been shed and hearts broken in its pursuit. As Janis Ian sang, "I learned the truth at seventeen, that love was meant for beauty queens, and high school girls with clear-skinned smiles."⁴ Beauty has been extolled and worshiped and kept just out of reach for most of us. (Do you like having your picture taken? Do you like *seeing* those

pictures later? How do you feel when people ask you your age? This issue of beauty runs deep!) For others, beauty has been shamed, used, and abused. Some of you have learned that possessing beauty can be dangerous. And yet—and this is just astounding—in spite of all the pain and distress that beauty has caused us as women, the desire remains.

During the midst of a talk I gave on the heart of a woman, one of the women in the audience leaned over to a friend and said, “I don’t know what this whole thing is about—twirling skirts and all.” The words had barely left her mouth when she burst into tears and had to leave the room. Little did she know how deep the desire ran, and how much pain it had caused. Many of us have hardened our hearts to this desire, the desire to be the Beauty. We, too, have been hurt so deeply in this area that we no longer identify with, perhaps even resent, the longing. But it’s there.

And here is the important part: it’s *not* just the desire for an outward beauty, but more—a desire to be captivating in the depths of *who you are*. An external beauty without a depth of character is not true beauty at all. As the Proverb says, “Like a gold ring in a pig’s snout is a beautiful woman who shows no discretion” (11:22). Cinderella is beautiful, yes, but she is also good. Her outward beauty would be hollow were it not for the beauty of her heart. That’s why we love her. In *The Sound of Music*, the countess has Maria beat in the looks department, and they both know it. But Maria has a rare and beautiful depth of spirit. She has the capacity to love snowflakes on kittens and mean-spirited children. She sees the handiwork of God in music and laughter and climbing trees. Her soul is *alive*. And we are drawn to her.

Ruth may have been a lovely, strong woman, but it is to her unrelenting courage and vulnerability and faith in God that Boaz is drawn. Esther is the most beautiful woman in the land, but it is her bravery and her cunning, good heart that moves the king to spare her people. This isn’t about dresses and makeup. The compliment

“You are beautiful inside and out” is one that makes our hearts blush. Beauty is so important that we’ll come back to it again and again in this book. For now, don’t you recognize that a woman yearns to be *seen*, and to be thought of as captivating? We desire to possess a beauty that is worth pursuing, worth fighting for, a beauty that is core to who we *truly* are. We want beauty that can be seen; beauty that can be felt; beauty that affects others; a beauty all our own to unveil. I love this poem that I believe expresses this core desire well:

Not merely in the words you say,
 Not only in your deeds confessed,
 But in the most unconscious way
 Is Christ expressed.
 Is it a beatific smile?
 A holy light upon your brow?
 Oh no! I felt his presence
 When you laughed just now.
 To me, ’twas not the truth you taught,
 To you so clear, to me still dim,
 But when you came you brought
 A sense of him.
 And from your eyes he beckons me
 And from your heart his love is shed,
 Till I lose sight of you
 And see The Christ instead.

—Anonymous

The Heart of a Man

As I (John here) described in *Wild at Heart*, there are three core desires in the heart of every man as well. (If you haven’t read that book, you really should. It will open your eyes to the world of men.) But they are

uniquely masculine. For starters, every man wants a battle to fight. It's the whole thing with boys and weapons. Over the years our house became an arsenal—pirate swords, Indian knives, light sabers, six-shooters, paintball markers, “air soft” guns (that name had to have been invented for moms). You name it. Our boys wrestled and hit and slammed one another up against the walls, and that is how they showed *affection!*

And look at the movies men love—*Braveheart*, *Gladiator*, *Top Gun*, *Saving Private Ryan*, *Kingdom of Heaven*, *1917*. Men are made for battle. (And, ladies, don't you love the heroes of those movies? You may or may not want to fight in a war, but don't you long for a man who will fight for *you*? To have Hawkeye in *The Last of the Mohicans* look you in the eyes and say, “No matter how long it takes, no matter how far, I will find you”?) Women don't fear a man's strength if he is a good man. In fact, *passivity* might make a man “safe,” but it has done untold damage to women in the long run. It certainly did to Eve (more on that later).

Men also long for adventure. Boys love to climb and jump and see how fast they can ride their bikes (with no hands). Just look in your garage—all the gear and go-carts and motorcycles and ropes and boats and stuff. This isn't about “boys and their toys.” Adventure is a deeply spiritual longing in the heart of every man. Adventure requires something of us, puts us to the test. Though we may fear the test, at the same time we yearn to be tested, to discover that we have what it takes.

Finally, every man longs for a Beauty to love. He really does. Where would Robin Hood be without Marian, or King Arthur without Guinevere? Lonely men fighting lonely battles. You see, it's not just that a man needs a battle to fight. He needs someone to fight *for*. There is nothing that inspires a man to courage so much as the woman he loves. Most of the daring (and okay, sometimes ridiculous) things young men do are to impress the girls. Men go to war carrying photos of their sweethearts in their wallets—that is a metaphor of this deeper longing, to fight for the Beauty. This is not to say that a woman is a

“helpless creature” who can’t live her life without a man. I’m saying that men long to offer their strength on behalf of a woman.

Now—can you see how the desires of a man’s heart and the desires of a woman’s heart were at least *meant* to fit beautifully together? A woman in the presence of a good man, a real man, loves being a woman. His strength allows her feminine heart to flourish. His pursuit draws out her beauty. And a man in the presence of a real woman loves being a man. Her beauty arouses him to play the man; it draws out his strength. She inspires him to be a hero. Would that we all were so fortunate.

By Way of the Heart

The masculine and feminine run throughout all creation. As C. S. Lewis said, “Gender is a reality and a more fundamental reality than sex.” I am very aware of the pain and confusion the gender debate has caused many dear people. I believe God’s heart aches over his sons and daughters, and their search for identity and belovedness. So let’s go back for a moment to the origins of humanity, to hear again what our loving Father wanted to say about us from the start in Genesis 1:26–27:

Then God said, “Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.”

So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.

Male and female he created us. Gender is a source of great dignity, and beauty, honor, and mutual respect. In this rather sensitive hour, many good people fear naming the differences between men and women at all, largely because they believe it will usher in discrimination

and divisiveness. But this need not be. When we understand just how glorious gender is, how distinct and complementary, how unique and utterly worthy of respect on all sides, I think we can find a better way in our relations. After all, Jesus—the most loving man ever—seemed to think that gender was essential to human understanding: “Haven’t you read,” he replied, “that at the beginning the Creator ‘made them male and female’” (Matt. 19:4).

God doesn’t make generic people; he makes something very distinct—a man or a woman. In other words, there is a masculine heart and a feminine heart, which in their own ways reflect or portray to the world God’s heart.

The longings God has written deep in your heart are telling you something essential about what it means to be a woman, and the life he meant for you to live. Now we know—many of those desires have gone unmet, or been assaulted, or simply so long neglected that most women end up living two lives. On the surface we are busy and efficient, professional, even. We are getting by. On the inside women often lose themselves in a fantasy world or in cheap novels, or we give ourselves over to food or some other addiction to numb the ache of our hearts. But your heart is still there, crying out to be set free, to find the life your desires tell you of. *You can find that life—if you are willing to embark on a great adventure.*

That is what we are inviting you to. Not to learn one more set of standards you fail to meet. Not toward a new set of rules to live by and things you ought to do. Something far, far better—a journey of the heart. A journey toward the restoration and release of the woman you always longed to be. This book is not about what you ought to do or who you ought to be. It’s about discovering who you already are, as a woman. A woman who at her core was made for romance, made to play an irreplaceable role in a shared adventure, and who really does possess a beauty all her own to unveil. The woman God had in mind when he made Eve . . . and when he made *you*. Glorious, powerful, and captivating.

TWO
WHAT EVE ALONE
CAN TELL

Even to see her walk across the room is a liberal education.

—C. S. Lewis

True beauty is reflected in her soul.

—Audrey Hepburn

My parents named me after St. Anastasia, a woman martyred for her faith in the fifth century, so that every week during the Catholic Mass, my name would be read aloud when certain saints were commemorated. That's why Stasi is spelled so uniquely. Take off the "Ana" at the beginning and the "a" at the end, and Stasi is what you get. I love it. And there's a deeper reason. I learned about Anastasia while in elementary school. Not St. Anastasia, but a princess. The youngest daughter of the last czar of Russia, Anastasia was rumored to have escaped the assassins who murdered the rest of her family. She was a young girl when her family was executed, and it was said that she was still alive, somewhere out there in the world, *incognito*. A true princess in disguise.

Women claimed to be her. One woman in particular was very convincing. Still, Anastasia remained a mystery—a princess lost unto this world, hidden but true. I was intrigued and enamored by Princess Anastasia. I began to read everything I could get my hands on about Russian history. For a reason I could not explain, I felt a kinship with this

mysterious princess, a connection to her. I wasn't pretending I was her, but still . . . something deep in my heart whispered that I, too, was more than met the eye. Perhaps I, too, was a part of royalty but my position had been lost. Perhaps I, too, was in disguise. My heart quickened at the thought of being a woman whose identity was once a true princess.

I don't think I'm alone in this. Have you ever wondered why the Cinderella story keeps haunting us? Not only is it a perennial favorite of little girls; women love it too. Think of all the movies made along its themes, movies like *Pretty Woman*, *Ever After*, *A Cinderella Story*, *Maid in Manhattan*, and *Enchanted*. Why is this notion of a hidden princess (and a prince who comes to find her) so enduring? Is there something in our hearts that is trying to speak to us? Is it just fantasy, escapism? Or is there something more?

The desire of a woman's heart and the realities of a woman's life seem an ocean apart. Oh, we long for romance and an irreplaceable role in a great story; we long for beauty. But that's not the life we *have*. The result is a sense of shame. Having listened to the hearts of women for many, many years, both in the context of friendship and in the counseling office, we are struck by how deeply and universally women struggle with their self-worth. "I feel like a household appliance," one woman confessed to us. Now, this is not to say that men don't also wrestle with their sense of worth. But there is something deeper to this struggle for women, and far more universal. And there are reasons for it, reasons unique to Eve and her daughters.

We are reminded of the seventeenth-century French philosopher Blaise Pascal's metaphor, that our unmet longings and unrequited desires are in fact "the miseries of a dethroned monarch."¹ Mankind is like a king or queen in exile, and we cannot be happy until we have recovered our true state. What would you expect the Queen of a kingdom and the Beauty of the realm to feel when she wakes to find herself a laundress in a foreign land? A woman's struggle with her sense of worth points to something glorious she *was* designed to be. The great

emptiness we feel points to the great place we *were* created for. It's true. All those legends and fairy tales of the undiscovered Princess and the Beauty hidden as a maid are more accurate than we thought. There's a *reason* little girls resonate with them so.

Rather than asking, "What should a woman do—what is her role?" it would be far more helpful to ask, "What *is* a woman—what is her design?" and, "Why did God place Woman in our midst?" We must go back to her beginnings, to the story of Eve. Even though we might have heard the story many times, it bears repeating. We clearly haven't learned its lessons—for if we had, men would treat women much, much differently, and women would view themselves in a far better light. So let us start there—with light. With the dawn of the world.

The Crown of Creation

To understand the creation story (John here), you must think of a work of art. Think of the Sistine Chapel, or the Venus de Milo, or Beethoven's Fifth, or of Sarah Brightman and Andrea Bocelli singing "Time to Say Goodbye." Creation itself is a great work of art, and all works after it are echoes of the original. How it unfolded and where it reached its climax are mysteries worth unveiling. We will never truly understand women until we understand this. The scene begins in darkness:

Darkness over the deep and God's breath hovering over the waters.
(Gen. 1:2 ALTER)

The breathless moment in the dark before the first notes of a great symphony or concert, a play, or an epic film. All is formless, empty, dark. Then a voice speaks.

Let there be light. (Gen. 1:3 ALTER)

And suddenly, there is light, pure light, magnificent light. Its radiance will enable us to see now what is unfolding. The voice speaks again, and again.

Let there be a vault in the midst of the waters, and let it divide water from water. (Gen. 1:6 ALTER)

Let the waters under the heavens be gathered in one place so that the dry land will appear. (Gen. 1:9 ALTER)

Creation in its early stages begins like any great work of art—with uncut stone or a mass of clay, a rough sketch, a blank sheet of music. “Formless and empty” as Genesis 1:2 has it. Then God begins to fashion the raw materials he has made, like an artist working with the stone or sketch or page before him. Light and dark, heaven and earth, land and sea—it’s beginning to take shape. With passion and brilliance the Creator works in large, sweeping movements on a grand scale. Great realms are distinguished from one another and established. Then he moves back over them again for a second pass as he begins to fill in color, detail, finer lines.

Let the earth grow grass, plants . . . and trees bearing fruit . . . (Gen. 1:11 ALTER)

Let there be lights in the vault of the heavens... (Gen. 1:14 ALTER)

Let the waters swarm with the swarm of living creatures and let fowl fly over the earth. (Gen. 1:20 ALTER)

Forest and meadow burst forth. Tulips and pine trees and moss-covered stones. And notice—the masterpiece is becoming more intricate, more intimate. He fills the night sky with a thousand million stars, and

he *names* them, sets them in constellations. Into our world God opens his hand and the animals spring forth. Myriad birds, in every shape and size and song, take wing—hawks, herons, pelicans. All the creatures of the sea leap into it—whales, dolphins, fish of a thousand colors and designs. Horses, gazelles, buffalo thunder across the plains, running like the wind. It is more astonishing than we could possibly imagine.

From water and stone, to pomegranate and rose, to leopard and nightingale, creation *ascends* in beauty. The plot is thickening; the symphony is building and swelling, higher and higher to a crescendo. No wonder “the morning stars sang together and all the angels shouted for joy” (Job 38:7). A great hurrah goes up from the heavens. The greatest of all masterpieces is emerging. What was once formless and empty is now overflowing with life and color and sound and movement in a thousand variations. Most importantly, notice that each creature is *more* intricate and noble and mysterious than the last. A cricket is amazing, but it cannot compare to a wild horse.

Then something truly astonishing takes place. God sets his own image on the earth. He creates a being like himself. He creates a son.

The LORD God formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being. (Gen. 2:7)

It is nearing the end of the sixth day, the end of the Creator’s great labor, as Adam steps forth, the image of God, the triumph of his work. He alone is pronounced the son of God. Nothing in creation even comes close. Picture Michelangelo’s *David*. He is . . . magnificent. Truly, the masterpiece seems complete. And yet, the Master says that something is not good, not right. Something is missing . . . and that something is Eve.

And the Lord God cast a deep slumber on the human, and he slept, and He took one of his ribs and closed over the flesh where

it had been, and the Lord God built the rib He had taken from the human into a woman and He brought her to the human. (Gen. 2:21–23 ALTER)

She is the crescendo, the final, astonishing work of God. Woman. In one last flourish creation comes to a finish with *Eve*. She is the Master's finishing touch. How we wish this were an illustrated book, and we could show you now some painting or sculpture that captures this, like the stunning Greek sculpture of the goddess Nike of Samothrace, the winged beauty, just alighting on the prow of a great ship, her beautiful form revealed through the thin veils that sweep around her. Eve is . . . breathtaking.

Given the way creation unfolds, how it builds to ever higher and higher works of art, can there be any doubt that Eve is the crown of creation? As Paul later writes, man “is the image and glory of God; but the woman is the glory of man” (1 Cor. 11:7). Not an afterthought. Not a nice addition like an ornament on a tree. She is God's final touch, his *pièce de résistance*. She fills a place in the world nothing and no one else can fill. Step to a window, ladies, if you can. Better still, find some place with a view. Look out across the earth and say to yourselves, “The whole, vast world was incomplete without me. Creation reached its finishing touch in me.”

What Does Eve Speak to Us?

The story of Eve holds such rich treasures for us to discover. The essence and purpose of a woman is unveiled here in the story of her creation. These profound, eternal, mythic themes are written not just here in the coming of Eve but in the soul of every woman after. Woman is the crown of creation—the most intricate, dazzling creature on earth. She has a crucial role to play, a destiny of her own.

And she, too, bears the image of God (Gen. 1:26), but in a way that only the feminine can speak. What can we learn from her? God wanted to reveal something about himself, so he gave us Eve. When you are with a woman, ask yourself, “What is she telling me about God?” It will open up wonders for you.

First, you’ll discover that God is relational to his core, that he has a heart for romance. Second, that he longs to share adventures with us—adventures you cannot accomplish without him. And finally, that God has a beauty to unveil. A beauty that is captivating and powerfully redemptive.

Romance and Relationships: The Answer to Loneliness

Man’s love is of man’s life a thing apart
’Tis a woman’s whole existence.

—Lord Byron²

Eve is created because things were not right without her. Something was not good. “It is not good for the man to be alone” (Gen. 2:18). This just staggers us. Think of it. The world is young and completely unstained. Adam is yet in his innocence and full of glory. He walks with God. Nothing stands between them. They share something none of us has ever known, only longed for: an unbroken friendship, untouched by sin. Yet something is not good? Something is missing? What could it possibly be? Eve. Woman. Femininity. Wow. Talk about significance.

To be specific, what was “not good” was the fact that the man was “alone.” “It is not good for the human to be alone, I shall make him a sustainer beside him” (Gen. 2:18 ALTER). How true this is. Whatever else we know about women, we know they are relational creatures to their cores. While little boys are killing one another in mock battles

on the playground, little girls are negotiating relationships. If you want to know how people are doing, what's going on in our world, don't ask me—ask Stasi. I don't call friends and chat with them on the phone for half an hour. I can't tell you who's dating whom, whose feelings have been hurt—ask Stasi.

This is so second nature, so assumed among women, that it goes unnoticed by them. They care more about relationships than just about anything else. Radio talk-show host Dennis Prager reported that when the topic of the day on his show is a “macro issue” like politics or finance, his callers will primarily be Ed, Jack, Bill, and Dave. But when the topic is a “micro issue” involving human relationships, issues like dating or faithfulness or children, his callers will overwhelmingly be Jane, Joanne, Susan, and Karen.

We were at a neighborhood Christmas party one December. It's an annual thing, the only time the neighbors on our street get together. The men pretty quickly became a huddle in the kitchen (near the potato chips), engaged in a passionate debate about . . . concrete. I kid you not. That was our topic of the evening. Concrete driveways. Meanwhile, the women were in the living room talking about sex after menopause.

Most women *define* themselves in terms of their relationships and the quality they deem those relationships to have. “I am a mother, a sister, a daughter, a friend. Or I am alone. I'm not seeing anyone right now, or my children aren't calling, or my friends seem distant.” This is not a weakness in women—it is a glory. A glory that reflects the heart of God.

God's Heart for Relationship

The vast desire and capacity a woman has for intimate relationships tells us of God's vast desire and capacity for intimate relationships. In fact, this may be *the* most important thing we ever learn about God—that he yearns for relationship with us. “Now this is eternal life: that

they may know you, the only true God” (John 17:3). The whole story of the Bible is a love story between God and his people. He yearns for us. He *cares*. He has a tender heart.

But Zion said, “The LORD has forsaken me, the Lord has forgotten me.” “Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne? Though she may forget, I will not forget you!” . . . declares the LORD. (Isa. 49:14–15, 18)

I will give them a heart to know me, that I am the LORD. They will be my people, and I will be their God, for they will return to me with all their heart. (Jer. 24:7)

O Jerusalem, Jerusalem . . . how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing. (Matt. 23:37)

What a comfort to know that this universe we live in is relational at its core, that our God is a tenderhearted God who yearns for relationship with us. If you have any doubt about that, simply look at the message he sent us in *Woman*. Amazing. Not only does God long *for* us, but he longs to be loved *by* us. Oh, how we’ve missed this. How many of you see God as longing to be loved by you? We see him as strong and powerful, but not as needing us, vulnerable to us, yearning to be desired. But as I wrote in *Wild at Heart*,

After years of hearing the heart-cry of women, I am convinced beyond a doubt of this: God wants to be loved. He wants to be a priority to someone. How could we have missed this? From cover to cover, from beginning to end, the cry of God’s heart is, “Why won’t you choose me?” It is amazing to me how humble, how vulnerable God is on this point. “You will find me,” says the Lord, “when you

seek me with all your heart” (Jer. 29:13). In other words, “Look for me, pursue me—I want you to pursue me.” Amazing. As Tozer says, “God waits to be wanted.”³

Can there be any doubt that God wants to be sought after? The first and greatest of all commands is to love him (Mark 12:29–30; Matt. 22:36–38). He *wants* us to love him. To seek him with all our hearts. A woman longs to be sought after, too, with the whole heart of her pursuer. God longs to be *desired*. Just as a woman longs to be desired. This is not some weakness or insecurity on the part of a woman, that deep yearning to be desired. “Take me for longing,” Alison Krauss sang, “or leave me behind.”⁴ God feels the same way. Remember the story of Martha and Mary? Mary chose God, and Jesus said that *that* is what he wanted. “Mary has chosen what is better” (Luke 10:42). She chose me.

Life changes dramatically when romance comes into our lives. Christianity changes dramatically when we discover that it, too, is a great romance. That God yearns to share a life of beauty, intimacy, and adventure with us. “I have loved you with an everlasting love” (Jer. 31:3). This whole world was made for romance—the rivers and the glens, the meadows and beaches. Flowers, music, a kiss. But we have a way of forgetting all that, losing ourselves in work and worry. Eve—God’s message to the world in feminine form—invites us to romance. Through her, God makes romance a priority of the universe.

So God endows Woman with certain qualities that are essential to relationship, qualities that speak of God. She is inviting. She is vulnerable. She is tender. She embodies mercy. She is also fierce and fiercely devoted. As the old saying goes, “Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned.” That’s just how God acts when he isn’t chosen. “I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God who will not share your affection with any other god!” (Ex. 20:5 NLT). A woman’s righteous jealousy speaks of the jealousy of God for us.

Tender and inviting, intimate and alluring, fiercely devoted. Oh yes, our God has a passionate, romantic heart. Just look at Eve.

An Adventure to Share

While Eve has a glory for relationship, that is not all she is essential for. Back in Genesis, when God sets his image bearers on the earth, he gives them their mission:

And God said, “Let us make a human in our image, by our likeness, to hold sway over the fish of the sea and the fowl of the heavens and the cattle and the wild beasts and all the crawling things that crawl upon the earth.

And God created the human in his image, in the image of God He created him, male and female He created them.

And God blessed them, and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and conquer it, and hold sway over the fish of the sea and the fowl of the heavens and every beast that crawls upon the earth.” (Gen. 1:26–28 ALTER)

Call it the Human Mission—to be all and do all God sent us here to do. And notice—the mission to be fruitful and conquer and hold sway is given *both* to Adam *and* to Eve. “And God said to *them* . . .” Eve is standing right there when God gives the world over to us. She has a vital role to play; she is a partner in this great adventure. All that human beings were intended to do here on earth—all the creativity and exploration, all the battle and rescue and nurture—we were intended to do *together*. In fact, not only is Eve needed, but she is *desperately* needed.

When God creates Eve, he calls her an *ezer kenegdo*. “It is not good for the man to be alone, I shall make him [an *ezer kenegdo*]” (Gen. 2:18 ALTER). Hebrew scholar Robert Alter, who has spent years translating the book of Genesis, says that this phrase is “notoriously difficult to translate.” The various attempts we have in English are “helper” or “companion” or the notorious “helpmeet.” Why are these translations so incredibly wimpy, boring, flat . . . disappointing? What is a helpmeet, anyway? What little girl dances through the house

singing, “One day I shall be a helpmeet”? Companion? A dog can be a companion. Helper? Sounds like Hamburger Helper. Alter is getting close when he translates it “sustainer beside him.”

The word *ezer* is used only twenty other places in the entire Old Testament. And in every other instance the person being described is God himself, when you need him to come through for you *desperately*.

There is no one like the God of Jeshurun, who rides on the heavens to help you . . . Blessed are you, O Israel! Who is like you, a people saved by the LORD? He is your shield and *helper* and your glorious sword. (Deut. 33:26, 29, emphasis added)

I lift up my eyes to the hills—where does my *help* come from? My help comes from the LORD, the Maker of heaven and earth. (Ps. 121:1–2, emphasis added)

May the LORD answer you when you are in distress; may the name of the God of Jacob protect you. May he send you *help*. (Ps. 20:1–2, emphasis added)

We wait in hope for the LORD; he is our *help* and our shield. (Ps. 33:20, emphasis added)

O house of Israel, trust in the LORD—he is their *help* and shield. O house of Aaron, trust in the LORD—he is their *help* and shield. You who fear him, trust in the LORD—he is their *help* and shield. (Ps. 115:9–11, emphasis added)

Most of the contexts are life and death, by the way, and God is your only hope. Your *ezer*. If he is not there beside you . . . you are dead. A better translation therefore of *ezer* would be “lifesaver.” *Kenegdo* means “alongside, or opposite to, a counterpart.”

You see, the life God calls us to is not a safe life. Ask Joseph, Abraham, Moses, Deborah, Esther—any of the friends of God from the Old Testament. Ask Mary and Lazarus; ask Peter, James, and John; ask Priscilla and Aquila—any of the friends of God in the New Testament. God calls us to a life involving frequent risks and many dangers. Why else would we need him to be our ezer? You don't need a lifesaver if your mission is to be a couch potato. You need an ezer when your life is in constant danger.

Picture the character Arwen in the mythic motion-picture trilogy *The Lord of the Rings*. Arwen is a princess, a beautiful and brave elf maiden. She comes into the story in the nick of time to rescue the little hobbit Frodo just as the poisoned wound moving toward his heart is about to claim him.

Arwen: He's fading. He's not going to last. We must get him to my father. I've been looking for you for two days. There are five wraiths behind you. Where the other four are, I do not know.

Aragorn: Stay with the hobbits. I'll send horses for you.

Arwen: I'm the faster rider. I'll take him.

Aragorn: The road is too dangerous.

Arwen: I do not fear them.

Aragorn: (Relinquishing to her, he takes her hand.) Arwen, ride hard. Don't look back.⁵

It is she, not the warrior Aragorn, who rides with glory and speed. She is Frodo's only hope. She is the one entrusted with his life and with him, the future of all Middle Earth. She is his ezer kenegdo.

That longing in the heart of a woman to share life together as a great adventure—that comes straight from the heart of God, who also longs for this. He does not want to be an option in our lives. He does not want to be an appendage, a tagalong. Neither does any woman.

God is essential. He wants us to need him—desperately. Eve is essential. She has an irreplaceable role to play. And so you'll see that women are endowed with fierce devotion, an ability to suffer great hardships, a vision to make the world a better place.

Beauty to Unveil

Beauty.

I (John) just let out a deep sigh. That we even need to explain how beauty is so *absolutely essential* to God only shows how dull we have grown to him, to the world in which we live, and to Eve. Far too many years of our own spiritual lives were lived with barely a nod to beauty, to the central role that beauty plays in the life of God and in our own lives. We held to the importance of truth and goodness. Had you suggested beauty to us, we might have nodded, but not really understood. How could we have missed this?

Beauty is essential to God. No—that's not putting it strongly enough. Beauty is the essence of God.

The first way we know this is through nature, the world God has given us. Scripture says that the created world is filled with the glory of God (Isa. 6:3). In what way? Primarily through its *beauty*. We had a wet spring here in Colorado, and the wildflowers are coming up everywhere—lupine and wild iris and Shasta daisies and a dozen others. The aspens have their heart-shaped leaves again, trembling in the slightest breeze. Massive thunderclouds are rolling in, bringing with them the glorious sunsets they magnify. The earth in summer is brimming with beauty, beauty of such magnificence and variety and unembarrassed lavishness, ripe beauty, lush beauty, beauty given to us with such generosity and abundance it is almost scandalous.

Nature is not primarily functional. It is primarily beautiful. Stop for a moment and let that sink in. We're so used to evaluating

everything (and everyone) by their usefulness that this thought will take a minute or two to begin to dawn on us. Nature is not primarily functional. It is primarily *beautiful*. Which is to say, beauty is in and of itself a great and glorious good, something we need in large and daily doses (for our God has seen fit to arrange for this). Nature at the height of its glory shouts, *Beauty is Essential!* revealing that Beauty is the essence of God. The whole world is full of his glory.

Next, there are the visions given to John, who was taken in the Spirit to behold God. As we can only imagine, he finds it hard to put into words what he saw (he keeps using the word *like*, as if grasping to find any comparison that might help us appreciate what he beheld).

The one sitting on the throne was as brilliant as gemstones—jasper and carnelian. And the glow of an emerald circled his throne like a rainbow . . . In front of the throne was a shiny sea of glass, sparkling like crystal. (Rev. 4:3, 6 NLT)

Is there any doubt that the God John beheld was beautiful *beyond* description? But of course. God must be even more glorious than this glorious creation, for it “foretells” or “displays” the glory that is God’s. John describes God as radiant as gemstones, as richly adorned in golds and reds and greens and blues, shimmering as crystal. Why, these are the very things that Cinderella is given—the very things women still prefer to adorn themselves with when they want to look their finest. Hmmm. And isn’t that just what a woman longs to hear? “You are radiant this evening. You are absolutely breathtaking.”

Saints from ages past would speak of the highest pleasures of heaven as simply beholding the beauty of God, the “beatific vision.”

The reason a woman wants a beauty to unveil, the reason she asks, *Do you delight in me?* is simply that God does as well. God is captivating beauty. As David prays, “One thing I ask of the LORD, this is what

I seek: that I may . . . gaze upon the beauty of the LORD” (Ps. 27:4).
Can there be any doubt that God wants to be *worshiped*? That He wants to be seen, and for us to be captivated by what we see?

But in order to make the matter perfectly clear, God has given us Eve. The crowning touch of creation. Beauty is the essence of a woman. *We want to be perfectly clear that we mean both a physical beauty and a soulful/spiritual beauty.* The one depends upon and flows out of the other. Yes, the world cheapens and prostitutes beauty, making it all about a perfect figure few women can attain. But Christians minimize it too, or overspiritualize it, making it all about “character.” We must recover the prize of Beauty. The church must take it back. Beauty is too vital to lose.

God gave Eve a beautiful form *and* a beautiful spirit. She expresses beauty in both. Better, she expresses beauty simply in who she is. Like God, it is her *essence*.

Stasi and I just spent a weekend together in Santa Fe, New Mexico, which boasts the third largest concentration of art galleries in the world. We love to wander for hours through those galleries and gardens, looking for those works of art that particularly capture us. Toward the afternoon of our second day, Stasi asked me, “Have you seen one painting of a naked man?” The point was startling. After days of looking at maybe a thousand pieces of art, we had not seen one painting devoted to the beauty of the naked masculine form. Not one. (Granted, there are a few examples down through history . . . but only a few.) However, the beauty of Woman was celebrated everywhere, hundreds of times over in paintings and sculptures. There is a reason for this.

For one thing, men look ridiculous lying on a bed buck naked, half-covered with a sheet. It doesn't fit the essence of masculinity. Something in you wants to say, “Get up already and get a job. Cut the grass. Get to work.” For Adam is captured best in motion, *doing* something. His essence is *strength in action*. That is what he speaks

to the world. He bears the image of God, who is a warrior. On behalf of God, Adam says, “God will come through. God is on the move.” That is why a passive man is so disturbing. His passivity defies his very essence. It violates the way he bears God’s image. A passive man says, “God will not come through. He is not acting on your behalf.”

On the other hand, and bear with us a moment, Eve just doesn’t look right in a scene of brutal combat, or chopping a tree down. From time immemorial, when artists have tried to capture the essence of Eve, they have painted her (or photographed her, or sculpted her) *at rest*. There is no agenda here, no social stigmatizing or cultural pressure. This is true across all cultures and down through time. What have the artists seen that we have not? Eve speaks something differently to the world than Adam does. Through her beauty.

Why Beauty Matters

Every experience of beauty points to [eternity].

—Hans Urs von Balthasar

Beauty is powerful. It may be the most powerful thing on earth. It is dangerous. Because it *matters*. Let us try to explain why.

First, **beauty speaks**. Oxford bishop Richard Harries wrote, “It is the beauty of the created order which gives an answer to our questionings about God.”⁶ And we do have questions, don’t we? Questions born out of our disappointments, our sufferings, our fears. Augustine said he found answers to his questions in the beauty of the world.

I said to all these things, “Tell me of my God who you are not, tell me something about him.” And with a great voice they cried out: “He made us” (Ps. 99:3). My question was the attention I gave to them, and their response was their beauty.⁷

And what does beauty say to us? Think of what it is like to be caught in traffic for more than an hour. Horns blaring, people shouting obscenities. Exhaust pouring in your windows, suffocating you. Then remember what it's like to come into a beautiful place, a garden or a meadow or a quiet beach. There is room for your soul. It expands. You can breathe again. You can rest. It is good. All is well. I sit outside on a summer evening and just listen and behold and drink it all in, and my heart begins to quiet and peace begins to come into my soul. My heart tells me, *All will be well*, as Julian of Norwich concluded. "And all manner of things will be well."⁸

That is what beauty says, *All shall be well*.

And this is what it's like to be with a woman at rest, a woman comfortable in her feminine beauty. She is enjoyable to be with. She is lovely. In her presence your heart stops racing. You relax and believe once again that all will be well. And this is also why a woman who is striving is so disturbing, for a woman who is not at rest in her heart says to the world, *All is not well. Things are not going to turn out all right*. "Like a fountain troubled," as Shakespeare said, "muddy, ill-seeming, thick, bereft of beauty."⁹ We *need* what Beauty speaks. What it says is hard to put into words. But part of its message is that all is well. All will be well.

Beauty also invites. Recall what it is like to hear a truly beautiful piece of music. It captures you; you want to sit down and just drink it in. We discover the song and play it many times over. (This is not visual, showing us that beauty is deeper than looks.) Music like this commands your attention, invites you to come more deeply into it. The same is true of a beautiful garden, or a scene in nature. You want to enter in, explore, partake of it, feast upon it. We describe a great book as "captivating." It draws you in, holds your attention. You can't wait to get back to it, spend time with it. All of the responses that God wants of us. All of the responses a woman wants too. Beauty invites.

Beauty nourishes. It is a kind of food our souls crave. A woman's breast is among the loveliest of all God's works, and it is with her breast that she nourishes a baby—a stunning picture of the way in which Beauty itself nourishes us. In fact, a woman's body is one of the most beautiful of all God's creations. "Too much of eternity," as William Blake said, "for the eye of man."¹⁰ It nourishes, offers life. That is such a profound metaphor for Beauty itself. As C. S. Lewis said,

We do not want merely to see beauty, though, God knows, even that is bounty enough. We want something else which can hardly be put into words—to be united with the beauty we see, to pass into it, to receive it into ourselves.¹¹

Beauty comforts. There is something profoundly healing about it. Have you ever wondered why we send flowers to the bereaved? In the midst of their suffering and loss, only a gift of beauty says enough or says it right. After I lost my dearest friend, Brent, there were months when only beauty helped. I could not hear words of counsel. I could not read or even pray. Only beauty helped. There's a touching story told from the hospitals of WWII, where a young and badly wounded soldier was brought in from a hellish week of fighting. After doing what she could for him, the nurse asked if there was anything else she could do. "Yes," he said. "Could you just put on some lipstick while I watch?" Beauty comforts. It soothes the soul.

Beauty inspires. After beholding all the marvelous wonders of the creation of Narnia (as told in *The Magician's Nephew* by C. S. Lewis), the cabbie says, "Glory be! I'd have been a better man all my life if I'd known there were things like this!"¹² Or as Jack Nicholson says to Helen Hunt at the end of *As Good As It Gets*, "You make me want to be a better man."¹³ Isn't it true? Think of what it might have been like to have been in the presence of a woman like Mother Teresa. Her life was so beautiful, and it called us to something higher. A teacher in

the inner city explained to us why he insisted on putting a fountain and flowers in the courtyard of the building. “Because these children need to be inspired. They need to know that life can be better.” Beauty inspires.

Beauty is transcendent. It is our most immediate experience of the eternal. Think of what it’s like to behold a gorgeous sunset or the ocean at dawn. Remember the ending of a great story. We yearn to linger, to experience it all our days. Sometimes the beauty is so deep it pierces us with longing. For what? For life as it was meant to be. Beauty reminds us of an Eden we have never known, but somehow know our hearts were created for. Beauty speaks of heaven to come, when all shall be beautiful. It haunts us with eternity. Beauty says, *There is a glory calling to you.* And if there is a glory, there is a source of glory. What great goodness could have possibly created this? What generosity gave us this to behold? Beauty draws us to God.

All these things are true for any experience of Beauty. But they are *especially* true when we experience the beauty of a woman—her eyes, her form, her voice, her heart, her spirit, her life. She speaks all of this far more profoundly than anything else in all creation, because she is *incarnate*; she is personal. It flows to us from an immortal being. She is beauty through and through. “For where is any author in the world Teaches such beauty as a woman’s eye?”¹⁴

Beauty is, without question, the most *essential* and the most *misunderstood* of all of God’s qualities—of all feminine qualities too. We know it has caused untold pain in the lives of women. But even there something is speaking. Why so much heartache over beauty? We don’t ache over being geniuses or fabulous hockey players. Women ache over the issue of beauty—they ache to be beautiful, to believe they are beautiful, and they worry over keeping it if ever they can find it. I was just at Starbucks and overheard the conversation between two women in their late fifties sitting at the table next to mine. The subject? Weight and diets. Their struggle with the issue of beauty.

A woman knows, down in her soul, that she longs to bring beauty to the world. She might be mistaken on how (something every woman struggles with), but she longs for a beauty to unveil. This is not just culture, or the need to “get a man.” This is in her heart, part of her design.

But Why a Beauty to Unveil?

One of the deepest ways a woman bears the image of God is in her mystery. By “mystery” we don’t mean “forever beyond your knowing,” but “something to be explored.” “It is the glory of God to conceal a matter,” says the book of Proverbs, “to search out a matter is the glory of kings” (25:2). God yearns to be known. But he wants to be *sought after* by those who would know him. He says, “You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart” (Jer. 29:13). There is dignity here; God does not throw himself at any passerby. He is no harlot. If you would know him you must love him; you must seek him with your whole heart. This is crucial to any woman’s soul, not to mention her sexuality. “You cannot simply have me. You must seek me, pursue me. I won’t let you in unless I know you love me.”

Is not the Trinity a great mystery? Not something to be solved, but known with ever-deepening pleasure and awe, something to be enjoyed. Just like God, a woman is not a problem to be solved but a vast wonder to be enjoyed. This is so true of her sexuality. Few women can or even want to “just do it.” Foreplay is crucial to her heart, the whispering and loving and exploring of one another that culminates in intercourse. That is a picture of what it means to love her *soul*. She yearns to be known and that takes time and intimacy. It requires an unveiling. As she is sought after, she reveals more of her beauty. As she unveils her beauty, she draws us to know her more deeply.

Whatever else it means to be feminine, it is depth and mystery and complexity, with beauty as its very essence. Now, lest despair set in, let us say as clearly as we can: Every woman has a beauty to unveil. *Every woman.*

Because she bears the image of God. She doesn't have to conjure it, become a certain size to achieve it, go get it from a salon, or have plastic surgery to obtain it. No, beauty is an *essence* that is given to every woman at her creation. Every woman.

In Closing

It is very important for you to pause just now and ask yourself, "What did I hear them say?"

We did not say that a woman is prized only for her good looks. We did not say a woman is here merely to complete a man, and therefore a single woman is somehow missing her destiny. What we said was, first, that Eve is the crown of creation. There is something uniquely magnificent and powerful about a woman. We tried to reveal the immeasurable dignity, the holiness of your feminine heart by showing that it is *God* who longs for Romance; it is *God* who longs to be our ezer; it is *God* who reveals beauty as essential to life. You are the image bearer of this God. That is why you long for those things too.

There is a radiance hidden in your heart that the world desperately needs.