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Sharlee Mullins Glenn

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This Holy Mess

Sharlee Mullins Glenn

When we go on road trips as a family, we often play what we call “Deep Questions.” One person asks a probing question, and then the rest of us have to answer (“What is the bravest thing you’ve ever done?” “If you could spend one hour with any historical figure, who would it be?” and so on). On one such occasion, someone asked: “What is your greatest fear?”

When it was my turn to answer, I responded (with what I thought was admirable honesty and vulnerability): “Messes.”

Everyone laughed. But I was absolutely serious.

I’ve always been terrified of messes. I seem to have been born with an extraordinary need for order in my life. Or it may be that the trauma and disruption of my early life led to this inordinate longing for things (both physical and emotional) to be tidy and predictable. I lost my father, my oldest brother, and my beloved grandmother all within a year’s time when I was five years old. When my grief-stricken, thrice-bereaved mother fainted at my brother’s funeral, I watched her fall and thought that she, too, had died. My whole world seemed to be careening out of control.

And so I became a neat freak. My few toys and other personal belongings were always carefully arranged according to size, color, and type—and heaven help the sibling who moved anything. For a time, I deluded myself with the hope that I could at least keep my own very small corner of the world in order. But you don’t have to live very long to learn that if anything at all can be said about life, it’s that it’s messy.

Which didn't keep me from trying to hold back the relentless advance of entropy by sheer force of will—and a good vacuum cleaner. I cleaned, I dusted, I straightened. I made lists, I set goals, I filled planners. I lived by the mantra, “a place for everything, and everything in its place.”

And it worked pretty well for a while. Though there were inevitable bumps in the road and some unexpected twists, things went more or less according to plan through high school, college, a mission. Then I got married. The first thing that threw a wrench into my well-oiled machine of order and predictability was the fact that no matter how carefully we tracked my cycles and rhythms and morning temperature, no matter how faithfully we ate the right kinds of foods and took the right kinds of vitamins and prayed the right kind of prayers, we couldn't get pregnant.

But then, finally, miraculously, joyfully, we did. And then we did again, and again, and again, and again. And I woke up one morning to the fact that I was a mother of five small children, none of whom seemed to care the slightest bit about my requirement for order.

Gradually, I've stopped fighting the disorder so much. I've learned to recognize its inevitability. On good days, I sometimes think I've even learned to find the beauty, or at least the value, in the messiness.



When our oldest daughter was twelve, the children's choir she sang with was invited to participate in a music festival in Italy. I was able to go along as a chaperone, returning to the beloved land where I had served as a missionary many years before. After a Saturday evening concert in Florence, our group had to arise early the next morning to travel to Rome where we would be attending mass and then singing in St. Peter's Basilica. Because of the early hour, a few people were late boarding the tour bus. Our Italian guide, Isabella, was becoming more and more frantic. “Hurry!” she called to the stragglers who were sleepily lugging their bags across the parking lot. “Andiamo! We can't be late for the Holy Mess!”

We all (Isabella included) giggled at her earnest linguistic blunder, but I haven't been able to stop thinking about it.

Many years later, I ran across this exact term—the one Isabella had formulated so innocently—in Ann Voskamp's book *The Broken Way*. “All of us,” Voskamp writes, “get pushed from safe wombs out into this holy mess.”¹

1. Ann Voskamp, *The Broken Way: A Daring Path into the Abundant Life* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2016), 12.

Holy mess.

Is there any better description for this thing we call mortality?

So much of life is at once holy and messy—birth, sex, creativity, cooking, relationships, parenting, forgiveness, death. In messiness, new life is conceived. In messiness, that new life enters the world. And in messiness (too often involving objectionable bodily fluids), that new life is cleaned, diapered, clothed, fed, burped, and cleaned again, in a seemingly endless cycle. In messiness, art is created, chaos is ordered (however fleetingly), patience is developed, and grace is extended.

Adam and Eve fell into messiness—a messiness involving weeds, labor, dirt, quarrelling children, sorrow, pain, and death. And it turns out that such messiness is a prerequisite for growth. Jesus Christ entered this world in messiness (into a stable filled with hay and dung), and, as our Savior and Redeemer, he willingly enters into our individual messes to be with us, to strengthen us, to help and uphold us.² Christ, broken on the cross, understands our brokenness and sanctifies it. Even after his resurrection, Christ retained the scars in his hands, the wound in his side—visual reminders, of course, of his transcendent sacrifice, but also perhaps nostalgic mementos of his own mortality and the holy messiness of it all.



A number of years ago, our stake planned a women's conference around the theme "Becoming Women of Holiness." In preparation for this conference, the stake Relief Society presidency asked us to seriously consider the injunction in Doctrine and Covenants 46:33 to "practice virtue and holiness before me continually." They then invited us to join them in an experiment—to try for one entire week to be holy.

I was genuinely excited about this challenge. One of my favorite hymns has always been "More Holiness Give Me." I think most of us yearn for this—to be better, to be holier, to be more like God. And I loved the wording of the scriptural admonition to "*practice* virtue and holiness." Practice. I could do that. Isn't that what mortality is all about—practicing? In his paradigm-shattering sermon "His Grace Is Sufficient," Brad Wilcox asserts that "we are learning heaven. We are preparing for it. We are practicing for it."³

2. See Isaiah 41:10.

3. Brad Wilcox, "His Grace Is Sufficient," devotional address, Brigham Young University, July 12, 2011, <https://speeches.byu.edu/talks/brad-wilcox/his-grace-is-sufficient/>.

Okay, I thought. I can do this. I can practice holiness.

The Hebrew word most often translated as “holiness” in the scriptures is *qodesh*, which means set-apartedness, separateness, sacredness. It makes sense, then, that it is easiest to feel holy and to act in holy ways when we are set apart from the world—on a mission, for example, or in the temple. The real trick is to feel and act holy while in the world. In really bad traffic, for example, or in Walmart on the last Saturday before Christmas.

And yet we *are* in the world. And it’s messy.

As I started my week of holiness practice, then, this question was wriggling about in the back of my mind: *Can one really be holy in a fallen world?* I woke up that first morning determined to try. My schedule was remarkably unencumbered that particular day—no meetings, no pressing deadlines, no looming demands. As I opened my eyes, I was filled with a deep sense of gratitude for life and for God’s grace. I rolled out of bed and onto my knees and said a focused, heartfelt prayer. I felt enveloped in peace. I greeted our children cheerfully as they stumbled, rumpled-robed and sleepy-eyed, into the kitchen and made a nice hot breakfast for them (omelets, toast, and fresh juice rather than just cold cereal and milk). I hummed my favorite Primary songs as I packed five healthy, hearty lunches, writing little love notes to tuck inside each brown paper bag.

As I dropped the children off at their respective schools and then headed to the gym for my morning workout, the sun seemed brighter, the mountains more majestic, the whole world more beautiful than usual. I was really feeling holy! I arrived at the gym and briefly wondered, *Can holiness and sweat coexist?* It turns out that they can! As I tackled the elliptical machine and the weights, I felt happy, holy, and grateful. I was grateful for everything—air to breathe, water to drink, a body that, even after five babies, could still walk and bend and run and jump (well, sort of). I was grateful for the smiles of strangers, the big air fans hanging from the ceiling, hand sanitizer in nifty new dispensers.

I retained that feeling of holiness as I drove home (listening to the Tabernacle Choir) and prepared my morning bowl of oatmeal. I was grateful for stoves, for electricity, for pans, for running water, for oats and blueberries and bananas and cinnamon. I prayed over my steaming bowl and felt as though I was in the very presence of God. As I ate my breakfast, I opened my scriptures and feasted on the words of Isaiah. They were alive and vibrant, full of poetry and grace. “Fear not: for I have redeemed thee,” I read. “I have called thee by thy name; thou art mine” (Isa. 43:1).

Even doing laundry felt holy. I remembered an experience I'd had several years earlier when I was an overworked, overwhelmed, chronically under-rested young mother of five endlessly needy little ones. During this time, I read a book about Mother Teresa. She was my hero. I longed to be like her, doing genuine good in the world. I yearned to be that kind of a disciple. I firmly believe that the essence of the gospel is to feed the hungry and clothe the naked, and I felt guilty that I wasn't able to devote more time to doing this. Then it hit me. Wasn't that exactly what I was doing? Wasn't I feeding the hungry and clothing the naked every single day in my own little family? This epiphany completely changed my mindset. The mundane, messy tasks of cooking, cleaning, mending, and otherwise caring for my family no longer felt meaningless. I was doing holy work.

I wish I could say I never once lost sight of this perspective in the ensuing years, but, alas, I sometimes did. But on this first day of my holiness practice, I remembered anew and eagerly jumped into the sacred work of sorting clothes, washing dishes, and chopping vegetables for the crockpot. The whole day slipped by in a happy haze of holiness.

Then the first child arrived home from school—tired, hungry, and uncharacteristically ornery. He intruded on my haven of holiness. He was sullen and sulky, which I could ignore, but then he got sassy and snappy, and I snapped back. And just like that, heaven collided with the dark and dreary world. Holiness evaporated, replaced by an oppressive cloud of contention. I felt sick with disappointment. How had I allowed this to happen? Why was I so weak, so easily beset by sin? I wanted the holiness back, the peace, the joy, the easy communion with the Spirit.

Then I looked at my boy (his unruly mop of hair and his too-big-for-his-body hands and his mad-sad eyes) standing there in all his glorious man-child holiness, and I felt my heart liquify. I hugged him and said I was sorry. Then he said he was sorry too, and voila! It was back. Just like that. That beautiful feeling of wholeness and holiness was back. Until the other hungry, school-weary kids swarmed through the door a few minutes later, that is . . .

I learned at least four important things from this experience: (1) holiness is slippery; (2) it's much easier to act and feel holy when other people aren't around to interfere; (3) holiness is more about gratitude and awareness and turning to the Savior than anything else; and (4) holiness may very well just be messiness sanctified by grace.

I also realized that, try as we might, we cannot make ourselves holy. As children of God who have been redeemed by Jesus Christ, we already are.

The trick is remembering that—about ourselves and about every other person on this planet. Messy and mortal though we are, we are all made holy through Christ, our Savior. As Moroni writes so movingly in the final chapter of the Book of Mormon, “Then are ye sanctified in Christ by the grace of God, . . . that ye become holy, without spot” (Moro. 10:33).



Life is untidy. It's a fact. And we are too. We are complex beings, all of us: byzantine mixtures of good and bad, strength and weakness, the sublime and the ridiculous, the sacred and the profane. In short, we're a mess. But we're a beautiful mess—a mess that Jesus was willing to die for. Even as my own temperament continues to impel me to fight against chaos and to yearn for eventual, eternal order, I know I must persist in learning from the mess, surrendering to the mess, embracing the mess, being transformed by the mess. The holy, holy mess.

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