

## Praise for Pershey

“Pershey writes beautifully about hard things. This is not so much a book about ministry as it is about life. Pershey examines her motherhood, her marriage and her ministry as they are all unfolding, in their tender beginnings, all three, works in progress. Despite being a memoir of faith, this honest book is a sanctimony-free zone.”

—Lillian Daniel, pastor and coauthor of *This Odd and Wondrous Calling*

“In *Any Day A Beautiful Change*, Pershey shows us with candor and grace how motherhood, the chaos and delights of family, marriage, and our bodies enrich our interpretations of ministry, scripture and liturgy. I’m especially grateful for this memoir as a woman who has experienced pregnancy in the pulpit, but it is a gift for anyone who longs to reflect deeply on life and the church. It’s funny and honest and wise.”

—Debbie Blue, pastor and author of *Sensual Orthodoxy*



# **Any Day a Beautiful Change**

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*A Story of Faith and Family*

**Katherine Willis Pershey**



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Katherine Willis Pershey



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P R E S S

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For Ben, who said, “*You should write about us.*”

For Juliette: “*I’m writing this in part to tell you that if you ever wonder what you’ve done in your life, and everyone does wonder sooner or later, you have been God’s grace to me, a miracle, something more than a miracle.*”

—MARILYNNE ROBINSON, *GILEAD*

And for Genevieve, who would not be if this had not been, and who is also pure grace and miracle.





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# Introduction

Juliette just had a temper tantrum. This morning I let her watch a shamefully long string of PBS Kids shows, far past the point where my guilt alarms start sounding. I told myself she needed the rest; for four days we've been sequestered in the house with influenza. I also needed the time. In a little over a week—just days after Juliette's third birthday—this manuscript I've been working on for much of her life is due to the publisher.

She didn't fuss because I turned off the television—even she knew that she had reached her limit. She fussed because she wanted me to play with her *right now*; I wanted to finish working on the paragraph I was revising. I bought myself a few more minutes by promising a round of Ants in the Pants if she would go fetch the game and set it up. She returned from her bedroom with the game in one hand and her hand-me-down tutu in the other. I helped her pull it on over her pajamas, hoping that an impromptu dance session would buy me even more time. But almost-three-year-olds don't only wear tutus to dance; they wear tutus for sick-day games of Ants in the Pants with their mamas, if only their mamas weren't so darn preoccupied writing books. I tried to buy one minute too many, and Juliette paid me back with a sorrowful fit. "I want you to play with me," she wailed.

I saved my document and drew my justifiably angry child onto my lap. "I know, honey, and I'm sorry," I whispered, pressing my cheek against her tear-streaked one. I picked up one of the books stacked on the bedside table: *The Middle Place*, by Kelly Corrigan, as beautiful, heartbreaking, and exquisite a book as ever could be. I ran my hand across the weathered cover, and considered the cover photograph of a little girl clad in yellow, suspended in air. Her expression is ambiguous; she could be midjump or midfall. "You know how I've told you that I'm writing a book?" I asked Juliette. She nodded. "It will be a book like this, a grown-up book with lots of words and no pictures, and my name will be on the front cover." She considered

my words for a moment, in her quiet way, and traced a figure eight around the girl with her index finger. I knew that she understood, at least enough for the moment. I also knew precisely what she would say next: “Can we play *now*?”

I had just wanted a bound paperback, one whose pages would exhale that familiar papery breath when I skimmed them with my thumb. That the book I grabbed happened to be a mother’s story was a coincidence. My bedside book stack is tall and its contents diverse; I could have just as easily selected *Heidi* or *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* or *The Message*. Still, as I undertook the nearly impossible task of flipping plastic ants into an oddly eager dog’s overalls, my mind wandered and I considered the similarity—and the dissimilarity—between that book and the one you hold in your hand (or, as the case may be, in your handheld device). Kelly Corrigan’s younger daughters were just younger and just older than Juliette during the span of time *The Middle Place* captures. But what might have otherwise been a straightforward “mama memoir”—if there is such a thing—was transmuted by the same cells that mutated and multiplied within Corrigan’s body. Her experience of early motherhood emerges from a wholly unexpected and harrowing context: her father’s and her own concurrent encounters with cancer.

*There but for the grace of God go I*, I thought, even as I squirmed at the theologically untenable implications of this involuntary yet practically universal response to others’ tribulations.

But my own experience of early motherhood had its own context, one that was not entirely unexpected. One that was, if not harrowing, at the very least vexing. The thing we worried wouldn’t survive was not one of us, but *us*. This book that might have otherwise been a straightforward “mama memoir”—*there is no such thing*—became something else: a story of a marriage that could have but did not end only months after the birth of our daughter. I am proud of my daughter, excessively and unfashionably proud of my daughter. I just told Benjamin that Juliette Louise Pershey might be the best person I’ve ever met. But I am prouder still of the divorce we didn’t seek, the marriage we stubbornly refused to forsake. We clutch it tenderly, especially in the moments in which it’s still hard to discern if we are midjump or midfall, because it is the gift we are determined to give our family. Marriage is the boundary

we established for the living of our lives, the context we have staked out for the story of our parenthood. In sickness and health and despair and joy, we belong to one another.

The story is complicated by another factor: Juliette is a preacher's kid, and Benjamin is a preacher's husband. Though once, early in my tenure as the first female solo minister of South Bay Christian Church, a member accidentally introduced Benjamin as the "pastor's wife." She turned crimson and smacked her hand over her mouth as soon as the phrase slipped off her tongue. (Fortunately, Benjamin laughed it off. If he hadn't, she might have actually died from embarrassment.) The concept of a pastor's husband is as novel as a female pastor, though increasingly less within the walls of mainline Christian denominations, which have been ordaining women for years. The thing is, more and more of the world exists beyond the walls of mainline Christian denominations, institutions that have wept and waved as their heyday departed. At beauty salons and train stations, on daytime television and in Roman Catholic parishes, most everyone expects ministers to be men. I met a new friend—now a much beloved friend—when I was pregnant. We'd first connected online; I loved the songs Allison posted on MySpace, and after I wrote her a dopey fan letter, she looked up my church website and read a handful of archived sermons before writing a (markedly less dopey) fan letter in return. When we met for lunch at a Marina del Rey *crêperie*, we discussed the social networking site that had brought us together. Everyone loved to hate MySpace, though the free publicity was a boon for musicians like Allison. "But it's the people that it's brought into my life that I love the most," she gushed. Allison *loves* people. "Some of the wildest characters!" I was curious, and said so. Thus far, MySpace had brought Allison into my life, and she wasn't an especially wild character. She got a funny look on her face, a look I couldn't quite read, and gently said, "*You* are a wild character, Katherine. You're a *pregnant pastor*."

I hadn't thought of it that way. But I was a pregnant pastor, and soon after a pastor who was also the mama of a nursing infant.

I'm not entirely sure how being a pastor colors my mothering. I'm sure I would be a different mother if I were a lawyer or pharmaceutical saleswoman, but that's an irrelevant tautology. I

would also be a different person. I do know that there are aspects of pastoral ministry that have made parenting a young child significantly easier. The church is a built-in community. The apostle Paul borrowed familiar language to describe the unique relationship between Christians, calling us brothers and sisters in Christ. In both of the congregations I have served, my daughter has benefited from a seemingly endless supply of brothers and sisters in Christ—as well as aunts and uncles and grandmas and grandpas in Christ. That isn't proprietary to her as a preacher's kid; anyone who joins a tight-knit community of faith is adopted into the family, though the children of preachers may be woven more tightly than most into that shared fabric.

The flexibility I've been afforded, first as a solo minister of a tiny congregation, and more unusually as an associate minister of a large church, is a godsend. Although I have worked full time since Juliette was five weeks old, I've never completely resonated with the classic image of the working mother, dashing out the door in the morning only to return, spent, at the end of the day. Days like that have been few and far between. I often come home for lunch and decide to work from home for the rest of the day. Juliette routinely spends a couple of hours in my private church study, a luxury we wouldn't have if I inhabited a cubicle from nine to five. When she was a baby, I often propped her on my hip after the worship service; she helped me greet the church members as they filed through the stained glass doors. On a few occasions, when it seemed appropriate, I brought her along when I visited church members at their homes. Some of my colleagues condemn this practice, believing that the pastoral visit is solely a time for spiritual care. All I know is the look of pure delight those lonely shut-ins flashed when I came accompanied by a chubby, slobbery, giggly baby; providing a dose of delight is surely a variation of spiritual care. They only let us leave after I promised to bring her back. Such a permeable line between work and family is rare, if not unique to ministry.

My vocation as a parish pastor certainly shapes this story. There are parts of the story I simply cannot tell because they are not mine to tell. Ministers help bear the burdens of others, and more often than not, we bear those burdens confidentially. I claim no right to

divulge the private joys and sorrows of those in my care, not even when those joys and sorrows affected me enough to affect my family's life. I am comfortable with the handful of lacunas in this book, the places where only I could know that a few pages are missing. I am significantly less comfortable with the places where I wish I could scrap the truth for happier (albeit fictitious) versions of my family and myself. Everyone knows—or should by now—that pastors aren't perfect. I don't feel a responsibility to live up to an impossible ideal. Still, as a pastor, I guard my own private joys and sorrows fairly closely. I don't believe it is the duty of my church to bear my burdens, at least not in the same way I bear theirs. That isn't to say they shouldn't care for me—and oh, have they cared for me. We have consumed a great deal of homemade soup in our day, most of it made in the homes of my parishioners. But I keep my crises at an arm's length from my church, or at least try.

Though it happens from time to time, as a writer I try to refrain from “bleeding on the page.” Much in the same way I try to refrain from crying at church, though that happens, too. Once, when I'd just learned our dog, Deacon, had developed terminal lymphoma, I decided not to mention it during the time in worship when members shared prayer requests. Not because a sick dog was unworthy of their prayers; they were a generous crowd who would pray about any little thing that troubled your heart. I didn't share the news because I knew I would fall apart if I did. But one animal lover knew of Deacon's prognosis and took it upon herself—completely innocuously—to announce it to the congregation. As soon as she began speaking I crumpled into the front pew and wept, frantically trying to regain enough composure to go on with the show. Complicating my sadness was a newfound panic that my church could no longer trust me to be their pastor—if I emotionally unraveled over a sick pit bull, how could I ever provide pastoral care to a human being with a terminal illness? I didn't even feel like a pastor. I felt like a little girl.

There are things in this story that make me feel like a little girl, that make my cheeks burn with embarrassment, that I have struggled to share with close friends and family. These are things I have never uttered before a congregation during the time of joys and concerns. And yet, here is a book about me—about my experience of

motherhood, marriage, and ministry during a season of profound joys and sorrows—bound and ready to whisper my secrets at the turn of a page.

*Will they still let me be their pastor?*

It's a chance I'm willing to take. There is something to be said for authenticity, let alone the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit. Ultimately, I am not merely telling my story. I am participating in the timeworn tradition of testimony, pointing to God's work in the world, starting with God's work in my life. It is my prayer that the people I serve will not begrudge my need for grace, especially because I have been preaching all along that it is grace by which we all are saved. (It can't hurt that the senior pastor in my new congregation grew up in the church; I've lost count of how many people have stopped in the hall to tell me the story of how, as a boy, he escaped Sunday school by climbing out of a window. These are folks who understand that ministers are ordinary people.)

I didn't yet know if the story would end happily when I began telling it, but I staked my hopes in a vision borrowed from a favorite song lyric by The Innocence Mission: "At any time I could change, any day, a beautiful change." Mine is a story of beautiful changes: the birth of a daughter, the healing of a marriage, the closing of one good ministry and the start of another, committed to paper even as they were yet unfolding, between temper tantrums and arguments and committee meetings and lazy Saturday mornings spent at the ocean, watching schools of dolphins feeding in the Santa Monica Bay. Any day, a beautiful change.

It has been so, and by the grace of God, may it continue to be.



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# 1

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## Before

Before my life was braided into a pattern shaped by marriage, ministry, and motherhood, I spent many a Friday night perched in the smoky loft of Brady's Cafe in Kent, Ohio. It has since been subsumed by Starbucks, and while I have yet to bring myself to return, I imagine that its quirky charm has been scrubbed clean. The new corporate management surely doesn't let graffiti flourish in the ladies' room or toss locally grown nasturtiums into the early summer salads, and the poets didn't even bother to ask if they could keep holding their monthly open poetry readings on the premises.

The place closed down the same weekend my husband and I left for California; we missed the going-out-of-business extravaganza—part celebration, part wake, part auction. My parents stopped in long enough to bid on one of the blue glass vases that used to hold sunflowers in the windowsill overlooking Main Street as a going-away present. We'd both been regulars, especially at the poetry nights. We met in a creative writing class when I was a sophomore. Benjamin was older by five years, and though he'd come to Kent State as a student, he was really more of a townie by that point. He didn't live in a dorm, or even one of the countless shabby student rentals. He lived in a halfway house for recovering alcoholics. I knew this because of the poems he read in class and at the coffeehouse. I'd never met anyone so shy yet so willing to tell unflattering truths about himself. It was as though he'd discovered that the truth was air; if he wasn't honest he would die, or at the very least start drinking again. Sometimes, when it was his turn at the microphone at Brady's, he walked

up empty-handed and composed poems on the spot. To me, it was even more inexplicable than those monks who sweep their intricate mandalas into piles of sand. Each line only existed in the moment it was being uttered. The community that gathered around cigarettes and coffee cups and words at Brady's Cafe loved to mythologize its members, and Benjamin was an epic character.

That said, while I started paying attention to Benjamin the moment I met him, I was too busy being nineteen to pay *too* much attention. I was equally into boys and religion—one particular boy, and increasingly, one particular religion. I came out as a Christian in our poetry class, reading a poem in which I imagined myself sharing a beer with Jesus. It was a decent poem, decent enough to win me a cash prize in the annual undergraduate writing contest and make me think I was *all that*. The truth was that I'd written it because my boyfriend had praised another girl's Jesus poem. Within the year, the boyfriend ditched me. Not only was I devastated in the way you can only be when you've meticulously renovated your whole personality to make someone love you, but I wasn't even sure I wanted to have anything to do with the faith I'd hastily adopted to please him. Not that Christianity was new to me; I was baptized as an infant on Palm Sunday with water from the Jordan River. Since high school, I'd tinkered with the idea of becoming a minister. I'd had a vision, an ordinary one without any bells or whistles or burning bushes. I simply could see myself standing in the pulpit of a church. Yet I had a minor issue: I wasn't entirely sure I believed in God. It struck me that this particular qualification was every bit as crucial as, say, perfect vision is for fighter pilots. Before the born-again boyfriend came along, I'd been exploring the Unitarian Universalist tradition, in which one can feasibly be a minister without sporting orthodox ideas about the divine.

So began a new epoch of my young life, an epoch mottled with heartbreak, anger, confusion, regret, and an embarrassing degree of dumb flailing as I strived to find substitutes to fill the gaping holes in my heart. Ever the poet, I committed it all to notebook paper. I cringe to recall how many such pages I forced upon my friends at the coffeehouse. (One of the things I hadn't lost in my grand devastation was the belief that, so far as poetry went, I was still *all that*.) If I had enough of an impression on the crowd to earn myself a mythology,

I don't want to know what it was. In the meantime, I decided to accept the position I'd been offered just before things started falling apart. Therefore I started my first church job—as a youth ministry director—a closet agnostic on the rebound in more ways than one.

I was a wreck.

I was a peculiar wreck; by contemporary standards of collegiate behavior, I was quite tame. I simply couldn't bear to be alone, and thus threw myself into a series of increasingly ill-advised flings, each consciously designed to make me forget that I had voluntarily obliterated myself for someone who didn't love me anymore. I succeeded only in making myself feel worse. Worst of all, I began to suspect that I was disappointing God. Surely, even the beer-buzzed Jesus I'd conjured for my poem wouldn't approve of such an ineffective and superficial healing technique. I didn't know how to extract myself from my own wreckage, so I tried the next best thing: I fled the country.

Responsibly, of course, I fled through a university-sanctioned study abroad program. I may have been an emotional spastic (my sincere apologies to the boys I dated in that era, especially the nice one), but even I couldn't let my broken heart or my spiritual crisis get in the way of my intention to graduate in four years, preferably with honors. Unsurprisingly, I lugged all of my issues with me to Mexico. My journal, which one of these days I shall burn with great satisfaction, testifies against me. But then midway through the summer, just shy of my twenty-first birthday, I received a letter from Benjamin. Three pages, one-sided, printed on the cheap yellow stationery my mother used to pick up at the dime store. He asked me out in the last line.

I'd hoped—even expected—to hear from him. I hadn't seen him much since our poetry class ended, but in the spring, we had reconnected at a festival honoring the poet James Wright. I'd carpooled down to southern Ohio with friends, and when we pulled up to the Knight's Inn Motel, he was leaning against his door, smoking a cigarette. He'd come alone; we were all surprised and happy to see him. That night our friends drank, and they were too tired to wake up for the morning readings. Benjamin drove me to the festival in his pickup truck. At lunchtime, our friends still hadn't reappeared, so Benjamin and I took a table for two at a diner

in downtown Martins Ferry. It was the first time we talked about anything other than poetry. Indeed, he was such a quiet guy that I hadn't heard him talk much at all, except to read his poems. I was surprised that there was more to him than the wounded intensity he funneled into his writing. He bragged about his brilliant niece and told funny stories about Laverne and Raymond, his grandparents. Most of all, though, he listened. I could even see him doing it. Due to poor hearing in his left ear, he cocked his head at an angle to catch my words before they were lost in the noisy restaurant. At the end of the day, I made up an excuse to catch a ride back to Kent in his pickup and offered to buy him a chocolate milkshake in return. When he dropped me off, though, I dashed out of the car, not giving him enough time to ask for my telephone number. I still maintain that the primary reason was that I really had to pee. I did. But I also was afraid, though not of getting involved with an alcoholic. If anything, his candidness about his problem and his desire to heal were appealing. What scared me was the prospect of involving myself—my wrecked self—with someone I might actually damage in my flailing. Reservations notwithstanding, I'd made sure he received a copy of my summer address.

Even more than the shy invitation to go out for dinner upon my return, another sentence caught me: *I hope there are things you won't even know how to write about.* I was startled by how fervently I hoped Benjamin would be one of those things, and I knew that if I dared fall in love with him, it had better be for good.

I wrote back to accept the dinner date. We married on my twenty-second birthday.

Our courtship was quick in part because I'd returned from my summer abroad with the intention to attend seminary as soon as I graduated from Kent State University. At the time I thought my faith was as shaky as ever, but in retrospect the leaps of faith I was taking were big enough to be downright foolhardy. We jumped into our marriage as if we were being chased by a shotgun, but it wasn't an unplanned pregnancy but our mutual need that yoked us. We needed each other almost as much as we loved each other. The whole thing could have gone either way, and if we really mean to be honest—Benjamin still treats honesty as if it were as precious as oxygen, and

I've learned to as well—we always knew ours was a risky union. But it's a risk I would never take back, not even during our worst moments (or years, for that matter: year one and year six).

Some Christian traditions classify marriage as an official sacrament: a means of grace. Keep in mind that baptism is also a sacrament, and though on the surface it appears the one being baptized is merely getting wet, the descent into the waters signifies death to self. That's mighty fierce grace; some of us need such fierceness, like Benjamin, and me. Through our marriage, we have learned that there is a difference between coming of age and growing up, a difference as broad as the chasm between not drinking and true sobriety. We have worked terrifically hard, not to earn grace (grace can never be earned) but to honor the grace we are so freely given.

Another gracious gift I have received is gentler, all things considered. As it turned out, I took to ministry as if it were what I was supposed to do all along. I'm fairly sure it is. I thought I was too broken and confused to be of use to God or the church, but that isn't the way it works. It's amazing that the gospel gets so twisted. Jesus' words are unambiguous: "I have come to call not the righteous but sinners" (Mk. 2:17). My work as a pastor has brought me such great joy I can't bear to imagine how my life would have unfolded if I hadn't barreled into seminary as blindly as we charged into our marriage. I wouldn't feel the weight of a dying woman's hand, clasping mine for a prayer. I wouldn't experience the thrill of playing with biblical texts in the pulpit week after week. I wouldn't know the comfort of completely fitting in when I gather with other clergy. It isn't all Easter lilies, but I swear: I even loved redrafting the bylaws that govern the church board.

What can I say? Sometimes youthful foolhardiness is rewarded. Greatly.

First comes love, then comes marriage, then comes the minister with a baby carriage.