

Finding The Extraordinary

Dr Lois Dodds (Part 1 of 7)



I have been thinking about you and how you are in some faraway place. One of the paradoxes of life when we are serving God is that we have an extraordinary passion, we have an extraordinary purpose, and you are probably in an extraordinary place compared to where you grew up and what's familiar, what's home, and yet the paradox is that in the midst of all the extraordinariness, life is mostly ordinary. I know it was that way for me when we lived in the Amazon jungle for 13 years: so many ordinary things, and sometimes it is hard to fit together why we have to put up with so much ordinariness when what our hearts long for is the extraordinary.

I think it is kind of the Martha/Mary conflict. I always love Mary and I identify with her. Mary is my soul mate. But I seem to have a Martha kind of life to live, in that there are so many people to take care of: a husband, children, all the people that we have around us who we want to make God visible to, and probably it is that way for you. So even though you have a very high calling you still have so much of the ordinary of life to cope with.

I remember once writing a poem about this in our early days in Peru. At this time my children were all small and I had a daily job to do. My husband Larry was off in the jungle taking care of the natives much of the time and being the doctor for our Centre, and I had to face all the usual stuff as well as try to get the extraordinary things done, so I wrote this poem called 'Dailyness':

Forgive me Lord,
for my impatience with the dailyness of life.
With you to know, a thousand books unread, great truths undiscovered,
how can I be content with peanut butter jelly, sweeping floors and making beds?

Give me patience
that I know you better through the humble things I do.
You said to do all things to your glory, to be faithful in the little and you would give me more.

You created me to search, to wish, to ponder.
Be patient with my dailyness.
Give me a heart that sings
and eyes focussed on you.

And then some extra thoughts:
Lord don't let my life-energy be dissipated or haphazardly spent in non-productive things.
Channel me Lord, your life in me, to serve and build your kingdom.

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One of the things I learned especially in our life in Peru – and I continue to learn it wherever we are – is that God actually speaks to me a lot through the ordinary things of life; through pruning rose bushes, pruning begonias, baking bread, watching the rain fall, watching a few things in my garden grow. I've been impressed that God so often speaks to me out of the ordinary. He knows my heart because he is the one that created it and he knows your heart. You are where you are right now because you are following what you felt to be God's call in your life, and yet you may be in a place where you have to bake the bread, maybe make your own mayonnaise, where to have a few things growing in a garden is a big effort.

So there you are in this extraordinary place, with an extraordinary purpose, and yet most of daily life is ordinary stuff. Well, how do you fit it all together? One thing that helps me is to actually look for God in the ordinary things. Another little poem I wrote when I was dusting one day; I noticed the sunlight coming in through the window, and you've probably seen this too: when there's a beam of light, even dust can be beautiful.

Dust, I like you drifting golden in a beam of light.
Why must you settle down brown?

Lord, keep me drifting in your light.
Don't let me settle down brown.

So, even though we have these ordinary things, God often speaks out of the ordinary.

Another time I was pruning – in my house in the jungle we had a lot of tropical plants - it was a very lovely setting - and anything in the jungle requires a lot of work. The plants grow very fast, faster than you can keep up with them. We used to watch the bamboo grow. It would grow so fast and we would put a tuna can on a piece of new growth and watch it go up about 12 inches in one day. So we had a lot of ordinary life there to ponder and to be part of, and yet it is this ordinary life that God uses to make extraordinary things happen.

What Larry and I discovered is that our family, being a loving family, a husband and wife and loving children, was the most powerful witness we could ever make to other people about who God is. And what we wanted them to see about God, they often said they saw in us. Now we didn't try to make this happen, it was ordinary life and yet the result was extraordinary.

I have a very dear friend named Chris Wood. She has just had a book published by Intervarsity Press called, 'Character Witness'. Now Chris and I have been friends for 38 years.

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I first met Chris in a class on Existentialism at night school when my husband was in Vietnam. I had 3 little bitty kids and she had 2. We became friends even though we were very, very different in personality and at that point were very different in our interests in life. In Chris's book, 'Character Witness', which is on friendship evangelism, she tells several stories about me, and one thing that God used to impress her with my being different, was that when I was potty training my son Michael I would sit in the bathroom and sing with him. Now to her that was unfathomable. She was just not the kind of woman that would sit in the bathroom and sing with her little boys. To her that was just an awful thing that he had to put up with and she couldn't imagine that I could sit and sing and have the patience to do something so ordinary. But it was that very ordinary thing - potty training, sitting in the bathroom with my little boy - that was one thing God used to bring her to a very extraordinary life with God.

She also tells another story which I actually don't remember happening, but I know she's telling the truth, and that is that I invited her to dinner once and when she arrived with her children and husband, I said, 'Oh, I haven't started cooking yet. Why don't you just come and help me cook?' And so we cooked dinner together, and again, to Chris, this ordinary thing had profound meaning. For the first time in her life she saw that you could have someone to dinner and it didn't have to be a show, because she grew up in a wealthy family where having people to dinner was a very big and official thing, and she didn't entertain because she didn't want to be big and official when she had 2 tiny boys. So to just come in a kitchen and help me cook and have fun together and enjoy each other, again such an ordinary thing, but with an extraordinary outcome because it was one of the experiences that God used to change Chris's heart.

I think that God uses ordinary things to train us so that someday our lives can actually become more extraordinary in terms of purpose and outcomes. I have another poem which I'd like to read to you that goes along with this idea -

Real Life

There is more than floors, dishes, diapers, curlers;
More than bread, milk, love, laughter;
more than commitment, betrothals, contracts, peace treaties.

Real life is inner below: the surface, above the self.
That closed circle which encompasses spirit;
Personality expressed; love put to the test; faith tried, true; finding self in you.
Real life is goodness, faith, justice, hope, trust, love. Real life is God.

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And if you look at Exodus 34 you will find out how God actually names himself Goodness. God is Goodness and Real Life is God. So we have the ordinary constantly filled with the extraordinary. I think that God uses our ordinary, everyday things as part of his plan to train us for his purpose. And His purpose is an extraordinary one and yet our training ground is ordinary life.

I have for many, many, many years loved the work of Edith Schaeffer in L'Abri, and way back very early in our marriage I wanted our home to be the sort of place that Edith Schaeffer described L'Abri to be, a place where people could come that would be a safe haven. Now long before we went off to live in Peru we began to open our home to many people in need; sometimes for a day, sometimes for a month at a time; people who were needy. We kept up that lifestyle when we moved to the Amazon jungle and our home there became something of a hospital. We didn't actually have a hospital – we had a clinic – but people whose souls were in distress often came to our home and stayed for days or weeks. People who happened by, we sometimes invited to stay, to share in the ordinary things of life while God was doing something extraordinary in their hearts and their lives.

I hope this helps you as you think about the ordinary things that you have to do each day: sweeping the floors, making the beds, changing the babies, giving kids medicine when they don't want medicine, waiting for your husband to come home; or if you are the husband, having to help out with all the ordinary things. Keep in mind that as you are doing the ordinary things those are the very things that make God visible through you to the people around you. And the way you change your baby, the way you cut the grass, the way you set the table, those attitudes and your love for beauty and goodness and God come through. So while you share ordinary life with people around you, God can be creating extraordinary outcomes in their lives.

I'll talk some more about this next time but I hope that you will be encouraged to think of the tremendous value that your ordinary daily things give to God's purpose.