

Vain Imaginations

Not long ago, I attended a retreat at which a college student, freshly discovering his call to an intercessory prayer ministry, spent hours every night praying by name for everyone on the retreat. The last morning when I ran into him, he said, "Sue! As I was praying for you, I received a word from the Lord for you."

Uh-oh. I'd heard this before. And every time I had taken it to the Lord, asking if there were anything to it, the answer was no.

My defenses up, I smiled and said, "I'm listening." He got a very thoughtful look on his face and said, "I have to get it exactly right. . . OK, the words were, 'Guard against vain imaginations.'"

I thanked him for this and promised to immediately take it to the Lord. I had barely breathed, "Lord, is there anything to this?" when the lightbulb came on in my spirit and I knew EXACTLY what this was about.

Oh yeah. This was from God, all right.

For about a year, my husband and I had been carrying around an open wound on our souls. We had been deeply hurt by several people we had trusted and loved, and it is not exaggeration to call it traumatic. Every single day of that time I had engaged in fantasy conversations in my head with the people who inflicted so much pain—except they weren't really so much conversations as monologues, with me lecturing on how badly they hurt us and how dishonoring their actions were to us and to God. . . yada yada yada.

Vain imaginations. Yep, this word was right on the money.

And God was so incredibly tender and grace-ful to merely

exhort me to “guard against” them. Not, “You bad girl, you’ve been sinning against my sons in your mind. Repent!” Not, “And who are YOU to set yourself up as judge and jury? Look at your own fleshly heart, kiddo!”

Just, guard against them.

So I confessed my sin of indulging in self-vindicating fantasy, and resolved not to go there again. It didn’t take long, of course, before my mind returned to what had become a familiar and comforting indulgence—an emotional “binkie.” I stopped and said, “Well Lord, what am I supposed to do instead?” He didn’t even have to say anything, just wait for me to connect the dots since I already knew. “Oh. I should be praying for them instead, huh?”

Okay. Fleshly sigh.

The biblical pattern for changing behaviors is to replace and displace the old with something new, and eventually the temptation to indulge in vain imaginations about this issue faded with disuse. It still pops up occasionally, but I know what to do with it.

“Vain imaginations” is a good term for a lot of popular mental sin we so easily rationalize: engaging in internal arguments with people who aren’t even there, the lusting that accompanies sexual pornography for men or emotional pornography for women (steamy romance novels). We all spend time thinking about things that are empty, fruitless, and harmful to our spirits.

And we all need to guard against them.

This blog post originally appeared at
blogs.bible.org/engage/sue_bohlin/vain_imaginations on
February 3, 2009.

Watching Transformation Happen

Last week I was privileged to attend the annual [Exodus Conference](#) along with a thousand people coming out of homosexuality, as well as some family members and people like myself who minister to them. Nothing has built my faith in the power and the loving heart of our life-changing God like my decade-long involvement in this kind of ministry.

I got to experience the power of answered prayer as I stood in worship with a divorced couple whom I have known online for several years but met at the conference. The husband had gone AWOL for the past year, choosing to pursue his feelings instead of his identity as a beloved child of His Father. He told me “something” kept drawing him back into the light: with a smile, I told him that Jesus has His hook in his heart because he belongs to Jesus! And there he was, reconnecting with his God and his wife in worship and the beauty of repentance.

I got to hear the testimony of a beloved young woman, deeply wounded, whom I have watched soften and become so much like her Jesus over the past several years. As we were singing the words “Sin had left a crimson stain, He washed it white as snow,” she suddenly and violently experienced the memory of being a sexually abused five-year-old, sitting in the tub with blood everywhere. In the pain of that moment, the Father met her there with the same words He had spoken to [Sy Rogers](#), that evening’s speaker, about his sexual abuse: “Daddy sees, and Daddy’s sorry.” As His compassionate love washed over her, healing came.

And I got to see actual physical transformation in a dear lady

with whom I have been walking out her repentance from lesbianism. As she has dared to believe that God really means everything in His word, especially about His love for her and how He sees her as a precious, beautiful, beloved daughter, change has come. She has gone to great lengths to drink in her Abba's love in intimate ways (and has taught me what that can look like in the process). Halfway through the week, she caught a glimpse of herself in a plate glass window and was amazed to realize that her posture had changed: she was walking more upright and confidently, assured that she was "a real person" (her words). At the end of the week, she said she believed the change in her was permanent and lasting. She finally feels solid, not hollow. That's the power of God's healing love.

And that's why it is such a joyful privilege for me to serve people whose thorn in the flesh is unwanted same-sex attractions. As their SSA drives them to Jesus, transformation happens.

And it is beautiful.

This blog post originally appeared at blogs.bible.org/watching-transformation-happen/ on July 21, 2009.

What I Wish I'd Heard Growing Up

I have the privilege of helping to moderate an online forum for women who struggle with same-sex attraction. One of the things that all the people in this ministry share is a history of hurtful relationships with their families, especially their

same-sex parent. (With some of them, the major wound came from not connecting with their same-sex peers as they were growing up, but all of them have some level of difficulty with their parents.)

Someone started a discussion thread called "Things I Wish I'd Heard Growing Up." In addition to making my heart break, I thought this list, from a variety of ladies, was also instructive about what love sounds and looks like:

Ruth, you are beautiful. You mean the world to me.
You are important in my life.
You have a gift.
I love you.

We love you no matter what.
We accept you no matter what.
You are "perfect" in my eyes.
You are beautiful to me.
I love you just the way you are!

You are important
I want you

You are smart
I love you (from my dad)
God loves you just the way you are
You are special to me
You are worth everything to me
I'd do anything for you

We wanted you
You are important

Your feelings matter
I won't drink/do drugs anymore
Your dad loves you

You matter.

Something I wish I'd seen: my parents looking happy to see me.

What would YOU like to do?

I'm glad you're a girl and it's all right to be, 'cause it's safe.

I don't need to touch you. I can just love you.

You can fail and I'll still love you.

No matter what happens to you, we will still love you.

You don't have to be perfect, we will still love you.

I believe you.

Don't ever be afraid to tell or ask us anything. We won't hate you or disbelieve you. We will do our best to help you. Even if we are afraid or nervous sometimes.

Something I wish I'd seen and heard: My parents praying with each other, depending on each other, being transparent with each other.

I never met my biological father; he died two months before I was supposed to meet him. I always wish I could have heard him say he loved me and was proud of me. I wish I could have hugged him.

I wish my mom would have said, "Hey, let's spend some time together," and not have it be because she wanted to lecture me

on something.

You are worth my time.

Let me do that for you.

You have done a great job (and not followed by a “but...” that wipes out what was just said)

I wish I was told that I was lovable and likeable

And here are mine:

I’m sorry you had polio. Tell me about what it’s like to live with a handicap. Tell me what your heart feels about that.

You are not damaged goods, and you don’t have to strive to prove yourself acceptable. You already are.

Lord, these are the cries of so many of our hearts. Let us hear You affirming us, loving us, singing over us with joy, telling us that You delight in us!

This blog post originally appeared at
blogs.bible.org/engage/sue_bohlin/what_i_wish_id_heard_growing_up on April 14, 2009.

When We Forget What is True

Sue Bohlin blogs about a conversation with a friend struggling with temptation because she had forgotten what is true.

Sunday morning as I was getting ready for church, the phone rang. It was one of the women from the online support group I help moderate for those struggling with same-sex attraction.

“Hi, Em.”

“Sue, can you talk?”

“I have two minutes.”

“OK, then in two minutes tell me again why homosexuality is wrong? I’m at an AA [Alcoholics Anonymous] retreat and there are so many women here I could really connect with and they keep turning out to be gay. And the leader is wonderful, but she’s a former nun who is just so happy and content with her lesbian partner. I can’t remember why I’m supposed to be fighting against what I want.”

“Oh. Well, okay. . . [*Lord, help! Give me Your wisdom here!*] Homosexuality is wrong because it’s not God’s plan. Because He created man and woman to be complementary to each other. Because two women can have a wonderful friendship but were never meant to meet each other’s needs in that way. Because lesbianism is about trying to fill your heart by drawing from another woman’s heart, but that one’s as needy and empty as yours. Because two people of the same sex cannot possibly reflect the ‘unity with diversity’ of the mystery of the union of Christ and the Church, where two very different, very other beings are somehow one. Because it’s two of the same, not two who are different, coming together as one. Because homosexuality is idolatrous—remember, it puts the other person, or what they give you, or the relationship on a pedestal where only God should be. Because when you give yourself to what God has called sin, it costs you the intimacy with Jesus that your soul craves.”

“Right. Right. . . . But Sue, it doesn’t feel like it. The others here seem so happy and content, and I’m miserable.”

“I’m so sorry, Em. Fighting our flesh will absolutely make us miserable. You’re doing the right thing. Don’t give in! Ask Jesus for help! Press *hard* into Him!”

As I turned on the water for the shower, a scripture sprang into my head, full and insistent. I called her back.

“Got a scripture verse for you, Em. I think God wants you to grab onto this for all it’s worth. ‘There is a way that seems right to a man, but the end thereof is death.’ Proverbs 14:12. Got it?”

“Got it.”

I am so proud of my friend for reaching out and asking to be reminded of what she knows is true but has forgotten why. What a great example of why we need community, why we need friends who also walk with Jesus, why God doesn’t want us to be “Lone Ranger Christians.” *Lord, help me continue to surround myself with people who will speak truth to me, especially when I am tempted to forget it!*

This blog post originally appeared at
blogs.bible.org/engage/sue_bohlin/when_we_forget_what_is_true
on Sept. 9th, 2008.

Why Kids Leave the Church After High School

The [Youth Transition Network](#) has released the results of research about why 70% of students in high school youth groups have left the church within a year after high school

graduation.

One big reason is the unrealistic expectations that our young people sense from parents and church authority figures. When asked, "What does it mean to be a good Christian," students responded with a long list of do's and don'ts, always and nevers:

- No sex
- No secular music
- No fun
- No profanity
- No bad attitudes
- Be perfect
- Be a virgin
- Be wholly devoted to God
- Be righteous
- Be a role model
- Don't doubt
- Have all the spiritual answers
- Always be positive
- Always be in a good mood
- Wear proper clothing
- Go to church all the time
- Always read your Bible
- Always be praying
- Know the whole Bible
- Get along with everyone
- Always be happy
- Never talk back
- Do not fail
- Do not fail
- Do not fail

Wow. And that's a PARTIAL list! If someone said to you, "This is what it means to be a Christian," would you want to sign up?

What's also heartbreaking is what ISN'T on the list:

Reveling in God's love for me

Appreciating His gifts of grace and mercy

Loving God back because I am so moved by His tender love for me

No wonder so many students live a "goody-two-shoes" Christian life on Sundays and Wednesday nights, and a completely other, separate life the rest of the week! No wonder they don't see the point of staying connected to a church once their parents stop making them go.

So many of our students feel that they can't be successful Christians. They think it's hopeless to live up to the expectations they sense. They think that being a Christian is just too hard.

Sounds like they need to be introduced to what grace looks like. Sounds like they need to have it modeled to them. Sounds like the rest of us need to embrace it ourselves and live it out so they can see it up close and personal, and see why following Jesus is so much more than checking off the boxes on our spiritual report cards!

This blog post originally appeared at

blogs.bible.org/engage/sue_bohlin/why_kids_leave_the_church_after_high_school on April 28, 2009.

Photoshopping Life

When Ray and I [visited the Galapagos Islands](#), one of my favorite pictures was the two of us with a gigantic tortoise. Unfortunately, my big ol' red purse was on the ground in the

picture too. So I photoshopped it out.



At our son's wedding, one of the ushers wasn't wearing his boutonniere when it was time for the formal pictures. "Not to worry," the photographer said. "We can photoshop it in later."

During my daughter-in-law's holiday family picture taking, someone suggested photoshopping in a beloved uncle, since they were missing him. "No! He's been dead for two years!" someone else responded. "You don't photoshop in a dead person who couldn't have been here with us!"

We just had fiber-optic TV and internet installed. We can now pause and rewind live TV. Whoa.

The ability to manipulate digital images and sounds has spoiled us, I'm afraid, into thinking we should be able to manipulate the rest of life. It's a technologically enhanced update of the enemy's lies in the garden, enticing Eve to think she and Adam were entitled to be like God, a thinly veiled offer to make themselves as gods, just as he had.

And so we end up with people redefining things like marriage to include any two people, including those of the same sex. And a couple of gay men who successfully got both their names put on the birth certificate of their adopted son. This is the fruit of people redefining truth and reality according to

their whims and desires.

And it is so much more serious than subtracting a purse or adding a flower.

This blog post originally appeared at
blogs.bible.org/engage/sue_bohlin/photoshopping_life
on January 6, 2009.

Poopy Messes

Recently a friend called with an urgent prayer request; she'd been summoned ASAP to her son's private Christian school and they wouldn't say why. She was concerned about her eight-year-old anyway because of some traumatic life situations they had been weathering, and she feared that maybe he was acting out because of how difficult his life had been.

Turns out someone had pooped on the bathroom floor and they had traced it to "Mark." They pulled him out of his class and had him wait for his mother in the principal's office. When my friend got there and found out what had happened, she said, "My son has occasional bowel problems. He's only eight years old. Why are you making a big deal about this?"

"Because," they replied, "he didn't tell anyone about it! He should have told someone! You don't leave poop on the bathroom floor! That's wrong!" They made it sound like he'd been caught stealing or setting the school on fire.

"Mark," my friend asked her son kindly, "Is there a reason you didn't tell anyone?"

In a small voice Mark answered, "I didn't know what to do."

My friend reassured her son there at the school and again when they got home, even though she was boiling inside at the insensitivity of the school personnel who made a scared little boy feel like a criminal for simply not knowing what to do.

What was missing was the awareness of a safe person he could tell "I messed up" without The Fear Of God hammering down on him. What was missing was any interaction with any adult with a kind face and a disposition of grace that understands that sometimes little kids make poopy messes that paralyze them with fear, and it's okay. That we clean it up, give a hug, and you're on your way. What was missing was a grown-up who remembers that there's a difference between making a mistake and making a choice to be rebellious.

My heart hurts for little Mark and for Mark's mommy, both of whom desperately need to experience the grace of safe people for both literal and figurative "poopy messes."

So I've been thinking about what it means to be a safe person, a grace person.

It means first of all being in touch with our own messes and our own sinfulness and our own desperate need for a gracious Savior. It means delighting in receiving the grace and mercy of God, and being committed to passing that grace and mercy on to others. It means remembering that since we live in a fallen world, everyone walks around with an invisible tattoo on their forehead that says, "Please encourage me." It means trusting God to shine His love and His grace and His mercy through our faces like so much light streaming through a stained glass window. It means remembering that everyone is still very much in process and a long way from our final form of glorified beauty and strength when Jesus is finished working on us.

It means that when someone makes a poopy mess, we set our minds on responding with "I'm sorry" rather than "shame on

you.”

Because it won't be long before we're needing some grace for our own pooppy mess. Again.

This blog post originally appeared at
blogs.bible.org/engage/sue_bohlin/poopy_messes

Spiritual Family Gatherings

This week (July 6, 2010) my husband and I are back in the Chicago area, where we both grew up. We're enjoying a few days with his family first, and then mine. Both of us are from large families; I'm #1 of seven children, he's #3 of six. Most of our siblings have children, and some have their own grandkids, which means a lot of people when we gather.

There are no intentional, earth-shaking conversations, but important conversations happen while we're just hanging out with each other. They're important because they solidify our connections with each other.

In our families, there's fun too. Different kinds of fun, since our family cultures are quite different. In my husband's family, we enjoy "the littles," being their charming toddler selves when they have sufficient sleep and food. (And we give grace when they're not so charming because they need a nap or a snack.) One of the things my family is looking forward to is a gig where my brother's terrific band is playing. He's a marvelous keyboardist and entertainer, and they cover other people's songs. It's fun to clap and sing and watch Brother Bill bounce and sway at the piano with an enormous amount of energy, rejoicing at the way he displays his giftings.

The reason we came up here is for a family reunion fueled by Facebook connections. Some of us have reconnected online, and it will be good to spend time face to face as adults for the first time. Others of us only see each other every few years at a wedding or funeral, and it will be such a blessing to just gather together simply to be together.

Family connections are different from any other. Blood relatives share genes and family history that have their own special kind of bonds. Cousins can enjoy a unique connection with each other that goes beyond same-age friends.

So often, God gives us earthbound experiences and illustrations to help us understand spiritual truths. When I think of the biblical injunction to “forsake not the assembling of yourselves together, as is the habit of some” (Hebrews 10:25), I think about how God wants us to connect with and enjoy our spiritual family the way we can enjoy our physical families.

When we hang out with our spiritual family, important conversations can happen simply because we’re together. There is fun to be had in these families, especially when people exercise the gifts God gave them.

There is certainly a different depth of connection with our spiritual family. We are blood relatives, because we are bound together by the blood of the Lord Jesus, Who bought us for Himself. We share spiritual DNA and the privilege of being family as well as friends.

And, at least in the cultures I am aware of, anywhere in the world, where the spiritual family gathers, there is always food. When we gather together, we should always remember why we are family, Whose family we are, and invite Him to the party. We can and should always remember the Lord whenever we break bread together, even if the bread is hot dog buns!

This blog post originally appeared at blogs.bible.org/engage/sue_bohlin/spiritual_family_gatherings

When God Shows Off

For the past several years I've been challenged to grow in my understanding of grace. John Ortberg says it's "the flow of God's power and presence and favor in your life, moment by moment, that enables you to do whatever it is God has for you to do."

So what does God's grace look like when it is released in our puny little human lives? I got another taste of it recently.

My dear friend Ricky Chelette of [Living Hope Ministries](#) and I were privileged to speak at conferences in three Australian cities on a redemptive view of homosexuality, ministering to strugglers, their parents, and ministry workers. The first leg of our flights to Sydney was delayed in Dallas long enough that we missed the connection in Los Angeles, and we were rebooked on the Sydney-bound flight 24 hours later. But that meant that we would arrive in Sydney after 21 hours of traveling at 6:30 a.m., and the first conference started at 9:00 a.m.

Any way you look at it, that's just crazy.

Neither of us sleeps well sitting up, so we knew we would arrive in Australia quite exhausted and sleep-deprived. Our prayer was, "Lord, we can't do this unless You show up with grace and power. We are completely dependent on You."

As the cabin crew started distributing breakfast, we compared notes on how we were feeling. To our amazement, the little snatches of sleep we were able to get recharged our batteries

far more than we expected. We felt remarkably good, thanking the Lord for that blessing.

We were whisked off to the church that hosted the conference, arriving at 8:15. That was enough time for both of us to wash our faces, brush our teeth, and change clothes. I was even able to put my contacts back in, which is really saying something considering the burning-eyes syndrome that usually follows a ridiculously long plane flight. At 9:00, we were introduced, and BANG! We were off and running.

And all day, we were aware that God was holding us up in His hands, pouring supernatural energy and alertness into us. We have spoken together at numerous conferences in the past, and there was no difference in the amount of animation or articulation in our teaching. People marveled that we had just stepped off a plane from America and they couldn't tell at all.

God kept us going all day and through dinner with our hosts, all the way till bedtime, as if we had had a good night's sleep in our own beds the night before. That's what grace looks like. That's what grace feels like. The flow of His power and presence and favor in our lives, moment by moment, that allows us to do whatever God has for us to do.

Grace is God showing off, where He gets the glory and we get to marvel at His power and goodness.

And it's very, very cool!

This blog post originally appeared at
blogs.bible.org/engage/sue_bohlin/when_god_shows_off
on Aug. 31, 2010.

Mothering Little Men from Mars

One of the greatest privileges of my life—right after saying “yes” to Jesus and “I do” to my husband—has been mothering my two sons, now 20 and 22.

Several years ago, my husband Ray and I started researching gender differences and discovered the truths in John Gray’s mega-bestseller, [*Men are From Mars, Women are From Venus*](#). It didn’t take long for us to realize that we didn’t have gender-free *children*; we had little men from Mars! And then I started realizing why I sometimes unnecessarily frustrated my kids and why we didn’t connect all the time—because I’m from Venus and they’re from Mars, and there is a HUGE gender gap between masculine and feminine! John Gray didn’t discover it; God created it, with great delight and a big smile on His face.

For example, boys, being male, are wired to be **self-reliant**. They act like they get extra brownie points for doing something on their own. One of my son Curt’s first whole sentences was, “**I** do it!” For boys, accepting help is perceived as weakness. For us relationally-oriented ladies, offering and accepting help is a way to make a heart-connection with another person. So when I would say, “Let Mommy help you,” they would be offended and I never knew why. If I could do it over again, I would tell them, “Let’s see if you can do it on your own. If it doesn’t work, I’ll be glad to help.”

One of the most powerful lessons I’ve learned about mothering boys is that the male mind is linear, life is handled only one piece at a time. This impacts both their thinking and activity.

Males tend to think on one thing at a time. I now know that

when my husband or sons are reading, it's not safe to start a conversation until I get their attention and they're looking at me. I used to frustrate the dickens out of my sons on soccer game days when they were dressed in their soccer uniforms, their soccer bags were packed, they had their game face on, and there were 15 minutes left before we had to leave. And I, being the ever-efficient one, would try to get them to use that time wisely to clean up the living room or fold laundry. They never, ever, cooperated willingly! And now I know why. I'd love to go back and change that part of mothering.

This linear approach also has a major impact on their activity. They are created to **do one thing at a time** before moving on to the next event. If I wanted their attention while they were watching TV, I would have to physically stand in front of the screen to break their attention and have them look at me. I, on the other hand, am a natural multi-tasker, because if mothers couldn't do more than one thing at a time, humanity wouldn't last more than one generation. So I would have conversations with my boys or direct homework while doing the dishes or cooking or a multitude of other things. I finally realized that because my kids can't multi-task, they never believed that I was actually paying attention to them if my hands were busy.

Knowing this, I have learned that when they start to tell me something, I put down whatever I'm doing, turn my body to face them squarely, and give them my full physical attention. It's been wonderful to see the difference; they now *feel* I am truly listening. I've shared this insight with several of my friends, who report that it's made a major difference with the boys in their homes as well. Their girls never gave it a thought, because girls intuitively know you can wash dishes and talk at the same time!

Where girls are more verbal, boys are usually **more physical**. I have a friend who wanted her boys to always move quietly and

slowly like girls, and had a “no rough-housing” rule in the house. This is the fast track to killing a boy’s heart, because boys were made to wrestle and tumble and be loud. This isn’t a design defect. It’s the way God was pleased to make them. While it’s not good to break lamps, of course, boys need to be able to MOVE while their moms smile and let them be who they were made to be.

Another thing I’d go back and change is trying to pry conversations out of my sons. I didn’t understand that females naturally generate three times as many words as males, and we talk to build community and knit hearts together. Boys and **men talk for one reason: to convey facts and information**. If they don’t have anything to convey, they don’t talk. A wise counselor finally explained to me that if I waited for my sons to initiate conversations on their timetable, I would get what my heart longed for. I also learned that one of my son’s love languages is physical touch, and if I would go in at the beginning or the end of the day and silently rub his back, he would often start talking. It’s amazing what meaningful conversations can happen at bedtime when the kids are trying to forestall sleep!

John Gray says, and it’s my experience as well, that a **man’s primary need is to be respected**. It starts when they’re very small boys. When a boy’s mother shows him respect, especially when it’s backed by a father’s respect, that fills boys’ “respect buckets.” Because they are made in the image of God, that alone makes them infinitely valuable and precious and worthy of great respect and dignity. I showed them respect by giving them significant choices, and honoring those choices. It started with choosing their clothes and making various school-related choices, and grew into choices like room colors and what sports they would pursue. I showed them respect by listening to them and not interrupting, by not being sarcastic, and by not saying shaming and condemning things. My son has commented that it’s important to remember that kids

are “little MEN from Mars,” and not talk down to them as inferior beings simply because they are not adults. He is glad we didn’t do it, but it really bothers him when he sees grown-ups do it to kids.

One last thing I’ve learned lately is the importance of supporting and cherishing our children’s gender to help them grow into healthy adults. Little **boys need to know that being a boy is a good thing**, and of course the same holds true for girls. After sharing this with a group of mothers of preschoolers, one friend took her little boy for a walk down to the lake. Along the way she said, “Parker, let’s look for frogs and toads. Mommy is so glad God made you a little boy so you could like yucky things like frogs and toads.” When they got back to the house, his grandmother asked, “So how was your walk?” and Parker said, “Mommy’s glad that I’m a boy because I like yucky things like frogs and toads.”

When my first son was born, my mother told me that mothers and sons, and fathers and daughters, have a very special relationship. She was so very right, and I thank the Lord for His good, so very good, gift of my sons.

Copyright 2002 Sue Bohlin

This blog post was originally published on February 26, 2002.