

**A Conversation with Melanie Shankle,
Author of *Church of the Small Things: The Million Little Pieces that
Make Up a Life***

Q. Church of the Small Things is such a fantastic book—funny and soulful. It’s not the first time you’ve pulled that combination off. You’re a New York Times bestselling author. How did you decide it was time for another book?

A. It’s funny, you know, my first three books came out in three consecutive years. I think part of me doesn’t know what to do when I’m not writing. As soon as I finish one, I start to think about what the next one will be. Plus, each of my books really comes out of where I am at that point in my life.

Church of the Small Things was born out of my own struggle with a couple of questions: am I supposed to be doing something bigger? Am I making a difference?

I feel like this writing-speaking thing is my fake life, and my real life is being a soccer mom who cooks dinner, goes to the grocery store and runs carpool. As I wrote this book, it was at the height of this phenomenon where it seems like everybody is under pressure to sell fair-trade jewelry and adopt 16 kids. So I’d been walking around with this guilt, like, I am supposed to be doing that stuff?

I prayed and just really felt God was saying, “You walk your road. I put you there for a reason.” So that’s how the whole idea developed, really.

Q. That’s such a good point. We are in the middle of a strange time where we don’t feel like we’re doing enough.

A. Right, and I thought to myself, I need to quit living with this feeling that I’m not good enough all the time, or like I need to be doing more. Because I think when you do that, you lose sight of all the things God is putting in your path—you’re too busy worrying about the “big thing.”

I think God says, “No. You’re supposed to do the *faithful* thing, whatever that is.” For some people, that means doing those things we mentioned. But for 95 percent of us—especially the women who read my blog and books—we are living in a more ordinary, day-to-day space.

Q. You write and speak about these complicated issues with such clarity, but you’re also absolutely hilarious. Have you ever thought about doing stand-up?

A. No, only writing! (laughs) My biggest fear is that people who read my stuff will be like, “Oh my gosh! I wish she’d come to my dinner party.” And the truth is, if you invite me, I’ll probably be the quietest one at the table most of the time.

It’s easy to be funny when you write. I go back and edit. I could never imagine getting on stage. I think I wrote about this in the book: at a PTO meeting once, a mom said, “Oh, she’s a writer and comedian!” and I was thinking, “Oh please don’t bill me as a comedian. That is way too much pressure to be funny.”

Q. Everyone who writes cannot go back in and edit and be funny like you are. You are David Sedaris-like funny.

A. Oh thank you! Oh my gosh. He is my spirit animal.

Q. You have these great sections in the book called “Things I Wish I’d Known,” devoted to everything from motherhood to high school. They’re so funny, and there is real wisdom there, too. Where did the idea for these lists come from?

A. In my books, I like to do something different. In *Nobody’s Cuter than You*, I included “10 Characteristics of a Best Friend,” or “The Things My Best Friend and I Say Together.” People loved it so much, so for this book, I thought, what could that be?

Since *Church of the Small Things* goes back in time—this is really the first book I’ve written that talks about my childhood—it seemed like a “things I wish I’d known” would work well. I’ve always loved reading them. They’re funny, and some are so true. I tried to think of real things I wish I’d known. In each stage of life, you look back and think, *Oh, if I’d known this in high school, I would have been so much cooler and better off.* The same goes for motherhood. Now that I have a teenager, I look back and think, *Oh my gosh. I used to worry about her grades in elementary school.* I did not need to worry about her grades in elementary school.

Q. You wrote such a strong piece for Good Housekeeping about being a mom to one child. You spoke with such grace and humor about a tough topic. Why do you think society makes moms of only children feel less-than?

A. That’s a good question. Maybe I feel that way just because of my own insecurity, but sometimes, when people say, “Do you have more at home?” and I say, “No,” I sense their judgement. At soccer, other parents are all running around, talking about how hard it is to shuttle all of their kids around, and I think, *Well, we just have one. That’s all we’re doing.*

And really, you feel kind of like you’re being selfish. Growing up, there is the expectation in this country that everyone will have at least two kids. I think what I’ve learned is more about what’s right for me—and not to worry about public perception. Why do I care if somebody thinks I’m not as much of a mom? I know that’s not true. We make all the same sacrifices, whether we have one child or eight.

Q. That ties in to what you were saying earlier about not needing to sell fair-trade jewelry or adopt all the children. If that is what you feel compelled to do, beautiful. But if not, just be you.

A. Yes. I also think you have to fight feeling like a failure if you realize, *You know? I don't think I could have handled the chaos and noise of three or four kids. That would have driven me crazy!* That is not a failure. That's how you were made. That is how I'm wired.

The older Caroline gets, the more I see one child is what's right for us. There was a time—and I haven't written about this much, if at all—but there was a time when I felt like maybe we should have one more. Caroline was in kindergarten, and I was about to turn 40. I was thinking, it's now or never.

I was praying about it, and my husband kept saying, "I'm happy with the one we have. I'm good." So my prayer was, "Change his heart. Change my heart. Change somebody's heart!" It became so clear to me that God was saying, "Look, you're going to give birth to something, but not another child." Two years later, I signed my first book contract. I know myself. If I had stepped back into the newborn thing, God knew I wouldn't be able to do what I am doing now, which I very much feel is my calling.

Q. You talking about your calling brings to mind the book's short section on Abby Wambach. It's really nice. You talk a lot of soccer—you take the soccer mom label and run with it. Why do you love soccer for you? And why do you love it for your daughter Caroline?

A. I love soccer for Caroline because seeing your child find something they're gifted in and that they love is special. The fact that she found that thing in first grade is amazing to me. I don't think she even realizes what a gift it is—I was about 40 before I found something I love as much as she loves soccer.

I also grew up in a time when girls were either cheerleaders or on the dance team. Girls were not as encouraged to play sports in the 80s. I mean, there were some who did, but it wasn't like it is now.

I wrote about Abby Wambach because she's one of the people who helped change that. That U.S. team put women's soccer on the forefront. Before that, girls played soccer, but they didn't have these role models they could aspire to be.

Sports teaches you so many life lessons—it's a constant life lesson, really. It's character building—you learn that you have to work hard at something to be good at it. You have to learn how to get along with all kinds of different people and work together as a team. Somebody has to be your teammate on the field, even if you're not necessarily friends off the field.

Right now, Caroline has a phenomenal coach. Sports has put some really great adults in her life that are able to help deliver those lessons—great adults who aren't her parents. That is so important for our kids—to have someone who isn't their parents teaching them these character-building lessons, especially as they get older.

As for me, it's a thrill to see my daughter be athletic. I was *not* athletic, so it's one of the great wonders of my life to witness how fast and good she is, and how hard she works. I love getting to just be at her games, watching those moments where it all comes together and she scores the

winning goal or makes a big play. There is a pride unlike any other that comes from watching your child do something they love.

Q. Everything you write about raising a teenager is great. It's often hilarious, but you also acknowledge the worry. What are we worrying about? What should we be worrying about?

A. Oh gosh. Everything. We should be worrying about everything. (laughs) We do worry about it all. We worry about who their friends are, the influences in their life and whenever they leave the house. We're so bombarded today by all the things that could go wrong. In the book, I cover "things I worry about at night": I didn't know you could get electrocuted jumping off a boat dock! Fifteen years ago, before social media, we didn't know these things could happen. Now, every day, I'm like, "Oh! I didn't know you could drown eight hours after you get out of the pool!"

They never tell you that you also have a better chance of getting struck by lightning in your yard than any of these things happening. But there are real things, too. Their grades, where they're going to college. What if they get hurt? What if they're bullied? What if *they're* the bully?

We are right to worry about these real things. But at the same time, the worst thing we can do is create fear in our kids at any age. They feed off our cues when it comes to how they see the world. I don't want to raise a kid who's afraid of the world. So for me, it's a constant leap of faith. I just have to trust that God has it all under control. I pray for everything—her friends, her academics, where she's supposed to go to college. But ultimately, any control I think I have over it is an illusion.

Q. You wrote about modeling compassion for our kids, too. If we want our children to act a certain way, we need to act that way.

A. Yes! At soccer last night, one of the other moms came and sat in my car during practice. Later, Caroline told me that mom's daughter said, "Look at our moms, gossiping in the car." And Caroline said, "My mom doesn't gossip."

I thought, *Okay, I don't know that that's always true.* (laughs) But I am glad that's how she sees me. I try really hard to model who I want her to be. If I am going to tell her, "Don't talk about your friends and get caught up in all that," I need to be the same way.

As kids in youth sports get older, leagues get more competitive. I see so many kids who have been raised to be great athletes, but they're terrible people. They've become spoiled, entitled brats. I don't care if Caroline is a great soccer player if she's not a good person.

Q. You share a lot of personal stories in this book. There is some tough stuff in here. You write a beautiful tribute to your dad—and the context isn't rosy. Your parents split when you were young, and what you write about him is so moving. Why write it now?

A. I feel like I cried the entire time I wrote that chapter. My dad and I, as close as we've always been, are more likely to joke around with each other than be sentimental. I wrote everything in that chapter that I am not sure I could ever say to his face. That's just how we are. We know how

much we love each other, but we're not gushy in real life. Is gushy even a word? How do you spell that? (laughs)

But I do feel like that chapter is everything I want him to know. There are so many things I know now, as a parent, that I didn't know to appreciate as a kid. He was so loyal and steadfast. I don't say this much because I am protective of my mother, but it would have been easier for him to walk away at times. But he loved us so much—he never entertained that idea. He called me every night of my life. I think back, and I know there were times when I was 15 and like, “Yeah, I gotta go!” He was unfazed. He constantly made the effort to stay in our lives.

The overarching theme of the book is small things, and he really taught me those lessons more than anybody: what it means to be faithful, right where you are, with your family and the people you love.

Q. You're pushing us to appreciate the little things, and it seems like so many of these essays about your family show us the little things you remember and cherish them doing. They're little things that are actually huge. Did you set out to hold up you and your family as proof of what our kids and grandkids will actually remember about what we do?

A. When I started writing, I knew I wanted to tell stories about my grandparents and to share that part of my life. I wanted it to be more of an overview of different moments in my life. But I didn't know how much it was going to focus on small things. The stories and essays came before the book's title.

As I wrote, I realized I was really talking about being faithful in the little things. About that time, I heard the story of the fish and loaves again—Jesus feeding that huge crowd. And this time, what struck me was the mom who'd packed that lunch.

That's the tie in. Today, we have all this bizarre pressure. We're made to feel like our kids will end up in therapy if they're not dancing with Minnie Mouse at Disneyland by the time they're four. And that's such a lie. Those aren't the things kids remember when it's all said and done.

When my daughter brings up memories from when she was younger, it's random—I'll say, “But all we did is go to Target that day!” I took her to the zoo all the time when she was little. She's never once said, “You know what I loved? Going to the zoo.” And I *hated* it. I felt like I was supposed to take her. Why did I buy into that? Who sold that? Clearly, some zoo owners.

I think about my grandparents. At their house, they were not constantly working to entertain us. They were just there, being faithful. I remember Sunday afternoons there, and sitting around the TV with them on Friday nights watching *Dallas*. We try to create these big, magical moments, and in the end, what we all remember are the tiny, seemingly insignificant ones.

Q. You also write about aging so well. You acknowledge that you bow to the pressure of buying these products even as you're pushing yourself and all of us to dig deeper. This is a tough place most women can relate to. How do you find that balance?

A. I don't know! (laughs) My 46th birthday is Monday. I was just with one of my good friends whose birthday is two weeks before mine—she just turned 46. I said, “Can you believe it? We're on the downhill side of 50.” And she said, “I know! Isn't it awesome?” I was like, *Oh, okay. So that's where we're going with this today. Because I don't know if “awesome” is the word I was thinking of.*

I come from a long line of vain women. My grandmother—my nanny, who I write about in the book—got a facelift when she was about 82. It was her second one. I don't know what you're going for there. Is it so you don't look a day over 75? (laughs) How much are we really accomplishing?

It's a hallmark of Southern women: “Well, she could at least put on a little lipstick.”

I have that in me. I do feel like it's a battle. How much do I want to age gracefully, and then how much do I want to get some fillers because these lines around my mouth are starting to drive me crazy? As with a lot of things, it all goes back to mothering: what message do I want to send my daughter? I believe first in inner beauty. I want her to see that. But I am also a believer in taking care of yourself.

That means different things to different people. We're not all the same, thank goodness. One of my friends just decided to let her hair go gray. I'm going to color my hair until I'm six feet under. If there is a fountain of youth out there, I'm all for it.

I care about fashion and beauty—it feels like a real, true part of me. I won't obsess over it. But I do enjoy a good lipstick and long eyelashes. And I think that's okay.

Q. One of the most compelling aspects of the book is the way you write about overcoming fear so that we can do what we're meant to do. Can you talk about your own experience with this?

A. Sometimes we disguise being afraid as being practical. I get it. But I am trying really hard to raise Caroline to feel free to choose different paths. Your path does not have to be you go to school, you go to college, you get a sensible job, you settle down.

Here's the truth: lives can look a lot of different ways. I don't want her to walk the practical path out of fear. I always knew I loved to write, but I didn't think writing as a real thing to aspire to do. I'll never forget writing my first creative essay in fourth grade: I got up and read it in front of the class, and everybody laughed. I thought, *Oh, this is my thing. I like this.*

But nobody told me it could be what I *do*. Nobody says, “I'm going to grow up to be a writer.” I mean, what is that? I always say it's code for “I'm going to wear sweatpants and probably not have a real job.” I had a degree from Texas A&M and felt all this pressure to get a solid job.

I do believe that when you have something in you, God won't let it die. Timing was everything. I graduated from college in 1994. We didn't even have internet. Start a blog? That wasn't a real thing.

Q. But then you did start The Big Mama Blog, and you were constantly writing again.

A. Yes. And when the blog started to take off, my husband Perry and I had to make a choice: should I quit my lucrative pharmaceutical sales job that afforded us a really nice lifestyle? Perry owns his own business. The risk was big.

When I look back now, I see so clearly that we were supposed to take that jump. It didn't mean we weren't scared, or that the next year wasn't the hardest year of our lives. It was awful. Those were lean times. But I wouldn't trade that year. It taught me so much. I hate character building in the moment, but it's so good after it's over.

Q. There is a lot here in Church of the Small Things for people to love and learn. If readers walk away with just one big idea, what do you hope it is?

A. I think the ultimate takeaway here is that God has called us to do the faithful thing, which isn't always the glamorous thing. He is using these small, everyday things in ways we don't realize. When I think about my grandparents, I realize it's not that they were thinking, *Oh, together, today, we are creating a rich legacy for our family*. No! They were just doing their thing, faithfully.

Our worship leader at church always says that God is asking us, "What's in your hands?"

Where are you? Where did God place you? That's how David killed Goliath. What's in your hands? That's all you need. Quit overlooking it because you're looking for the big, important things.

About Melanie Shankle

Melanie Shankle is the *New York Times* bestselling author behind *Nobody's Cuter Than You*, *The Antelope in the Living Room*, *Sparkly Green Earrings*, and the forthcoming *Church of the Small Things: The Million Little Pieces That Make Up a Life*, out October 3, 2017. She first shared her hilarious observations and loving wisdom on The Big Mama Blog, which helped define a new genre of blogging for women as it attracted a devoted audience now thousands deep. The Texas A&M graduate is also a guest blogger for high profile outlets and an in-demand speaker at events across the country. A proud Texan, self-professed Target junkie, and lover of Anthropologie sales, Melanie calls San Antonio home with her husband Perry, teenage daughter Caroline, and two wild dogs Piper and Mabel. For more information, please visit www.MelanieShankle.com.