



by Lindsay Williams

REAL LIFE



Her name may be on the front of a book (or four!), but Melanie Shankle says her byline is a byproduct of her fake life.

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MELANIE SHANKLE sits in the corner of the sprawling lobby of a Nashville hotel on a warm, sun-kissed day. She's taking out time for an interview before she heads down the street to her publishing house

for meetings to discuss her latest book, *Church of the Small Things* (Zondervan). As she talks about being a mom to an almost-high schooler, she says interviewing still feels uncomfortable to her. Not that anyone would notice by the confident, down-to-earth, conversational way she engages people. She's known as "Big Mama" to her 250,000 blog followers who faithfully read her blog, and she's the author of four books. Yet, she declares blogs and books and beautiful fans hanging on her every word are far from what define her. And seeing her picture on a poster at Barnes & Noble? Well, she may never get used to that.

"This part still doesn't feel real to me — even with the fourth book," she says as she settles into a plush leather chair for the interview. "This is my fake life, and the other is my real life. I can have a day where I'm at a conference and I have a book line and women are wanting me to sign them and take pictures with me. But I get home, and the next day, I'm cleaning my toilets.

"I feel so honored that God gave me any kind of a platform or a voice, but that's not my real life," she insists. "If I'm not getting my home life right and my parenting and my marriage and all that, then the rest of this doesn't matter because all of that needs to be an overflow, to me, of what I do every day."

Her day might include some writing — and the occasional speaking engagement — but mostly Melanie's regular routine revolves around her 13-year-old daughter, Caroline, and her husband of 20 years, Perry. In any given 24-hour period, she's doing laundry, packing her daughter's school lunch,

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PHOTOS PROVIDED BY HARPER COLLINS PUBLISHERS

helping with homework, and cheering on the sidelines of Caroline's soccer games. Does that sound familiar?

"As life goes on, you just do the thing in front of you," she observes. "Most of us live in the ordinary."

And that's the place she writes from, making her blog posts and books relatable to women of all ages and stages of life. Still, in the midst of the seemingly ordinary, she admits it's easy to feel like your life is insignificant.



GRATITUDE

As Melanie prepares for Thanksgiving, she reflects on life's simplest pleasures. "I'm thankful for the beauty of online shopping. I'm thankful for a hot cup of coffee in the morning. I'm thankful for my friends. I'm thankful for rainy days. I'm thankful for times when work deadlines are finished, and I can sit on my couch and watch something on Netflix. It's the little stuff," she contends, before getting more serious.

"I'm thankful for times when I see things that I've tried to teach Caroline actually come to fruition," she adds. "In my marriage, I'm thankful that we stuck with it."

Gratitude, she insists, is the key to life. "I think it's the most important thing," Melanie says. "When we lose our gratitude, when we start taking it all for granted, we lose perspective; and I think that can send us spiraling into either depression or into that comparison trap."

Instead, Melanie practices shifting her focus to the everyday beauty around her. She keeps Bible verses in the places she visits on a daily basis — on her bathroom mirror, in her laundry room, on the dashboard of her car — reminding her of God's promises. So when life gets challenging, she can replace the lies of the enemy with His truth.

"Even on the hardest days of marriage and mothering and all that stuff, there was a time when this was all I prayed for. Sometimes I stop and think, *This is exactly what I wanted, and I have it, and I need to be grateful for it even if I don't love it today. I choose to be grateful that God put me here. Even with all its headaches and mess and struggles and all that, I'm still thankful that today's here.*"

"As I've gotten older, I think that my prayer just became, 'God, help me to walk my road.' And that is still my prayer when I start looking around at what other people are doing. My road is going to be *my* road, and it's not going to look like anybody else's," she wisely concludes. "If I wake up every morning, and my prayer is, 'God, let me hear You today. Let me see You today,' then if I'm supposed to be doing some big, huge something, He's going to lead me to that."

The Comparison Trap

Today, perhaps more than ever before, it's easy to look at women with large, influential platforms doing globally-impactful work and wonder if bedtime stories and midnight feedings are the stuff that make up epic lives. Thanks to social media, we're constantly bombarded with countless reasons why we don't measure up.

"Before Pinterest, I didn't know how fabulous a house could look," Melanie offers. "During spring break, I can feel like everybody's skiing

or in Costa Rica except for me. On anniversaries, everybody's husband is surprising them with flowers. You have to remind yourself it's just a snapshot of somebody's life."

It's tempting to sell ourselves short when we seek social media's stamp of approval on our own imperfect lives. "No matter what you do, you can kill yourself with comparisons if you allow yourself to go down that road. If you spend all your time looking at your neighbor's house next door, you're going to be discontent with your own house," Melanie advises, adding, "You know what? None of us have it all together. I think, at the heart of it, that's what we're trying to see is, 'Am I OK? Am I normal? How do I measure up to what everybody else is doing?'"

Marriage Motivation

While Melanie admits it takes little effort, aside from opening an app on her phone, to fall into the trap of comparing her marriage and mothering to others, she realizes God doesn't write duplicate stories. And she's grateful for hers, despite the difficult chapters.

Her parents separated when she was young, and she continues to feel the ripple effects of that decision in her life today, even in her 40s. "It's your wedding all those years later, and when you have your own babies and all those family events," she explains. "Divorce is still a thing you deal with for the rest of your life."

That's why when she met Perry at Texas A&M, she was certain their

IF WE STAY THE COURSE, THERE ARE ALWAYS OPPORTUNITIES FOR GOD TO USE US RIGHT WHERE WE ARE ... IN THE MIDST OF THE ORDINARY.

commitment would be one that would last a lifetime. "I lived through that as a kid, so I felt like my mindset was always to be more determined than ever to get in a good marriage and to make marriage work," Melanie says, reflecting on being a product of divorce. "I feel like my husband and I both approached it where it's like, this is it. We're not backing out of this deal. We're in it for the long haul. We've been blessed and fortunate that, in spite of being two idiots, we chose pretty well. After 20 years, we still like each other."

Motherhood Myths

For Melanie, life in San Antonio with her little family of three is a dream come true. "My parents divorced when I was 8, so for me, I think all I ever wanted was family," she shares. "God was faithful to me because I look back at myself as a little girl and think, *To have this family that I love so much — that was my dream. That was what I wanted.*"

Realizing Caroline has only four more years at home before heading to college, Melanie is especially soaking in every moment with her dream of a daughter and even relishing the teenage years. "Having a teenager, it's just so much fun to see who she's becoming and what her interests are and to have real conversations. I'm just starting to enjoy this so much, and I don't want this season to end," she admits. "I feel like we're in a sweet spot of life right now. In a way, it's like we're transitioning to a friendship. I like this season of feeling settled."

Looking back on 13 years of parenting, she says motherhood continues to surprise her. "I didn't know you could love a person that much. I mean, I think the love you have for your child is so different because they're such a part of you. I feel everything that happens to her. Like, when she's walking into a new experience, how nervous I get; I would sacrifice anything for her," she maintains. "It's just a different depth of love that I didn't know we had as humans — how much you take on what another person is feeling."

Yet, she admits a big portion of mothering is thankless. "In the day-to-day, there's not a whole lot of gratitude for what you do. You're pouring yourself out, but you don't even care. You just love them so much that you're just like, 'I'd do anything for you,'" Melanie admits. "The most selfless thing, I think, you do in life is to be a parent, because it's really not about you. It's about the kid."

Despite all the tireless self-sacrifice, Melanie is quick to dispel the "perfect parent" myth — contrary to what Instagram might tell you. "There's

no such thing as a perfect mom. All of us are just doing the best we can. I think sometimes we need to quit trying so hard and quit beating ourselves up that it doesn't look perfect. We're going to mess up, and I just believe that God covers those places," she contends. "If He created this person, and He gave this person to you, you're not supposed to look like that mom over there. You're supposed to be exactly who you are."

Walk Your Road

Being who you are uniquely created to be means keeping your eyes fixed on your own lane. If we stay the course, there are always opportunities for God to use us right where we are ... in the midst of the ordinary.

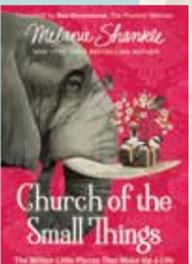
"I always want to be open if He's leading me to something new, but I also don't want to lose sight of where I am and how God means to use me in my community and in my neighborhood and in my family," Melanie maintains. "No matter what you do in life and wherever you are, you have to realize that sometimes God keeps you in a place where your calling isn't going to exceed your character. I think you've got to stay true to who you are no matter where you go in life."

CHURCH OF THE SMALL THINGS

Melanie introduces her new book, *Church of the Small Things*, with a story about the little boy who offered up his meager lunch of five loaves and two fish to Jesus. This young boy gave the little he had and with Jesus' help fed the big crowd of five thousand. She asks, "But what about the mom who packed that lunch?" Suddenly, the mundane doesn't look so insignificant after all.

"I think we need to believe in the small things," Melanie challenges. "As God sees that you're faithful with a little, He continues to add to what He puts on your plate and what He puts in your path." The book also includes a Bible study component.

Available at lifeway.com.



Case in point: Today, Melanie Shankle is being interviewed. Tomorrow, she'll spend the day with her daughter and maybe throw in a load of laundry. After all, this author thing is just her side gig and one of the many ways God is choosing to use her in the present. It's not her real life. □

Lindsay Williams is a freelance writer and editor based in Nashville, Tenn. She contributes to a variety of print and online media outlets, including *HomeLife*, *ParentLife*, *Homecoming*, and *Nashville Lifestyles* magazines, UPTV.com and crosswalk.com, among others. She blogs regularly about Christian music at thesoundopinion.com.