



Living with TRUE CONFIDENCE

by *Debra Evans*

A dozen women's magazines line the checkout aisle at the grocery store, each cover announcing the latest formula for being a beautiful woman, the ideal mom, or a successful career woman. Impulsively, you slip one or two magazines into the cart, hoping you've at last found the secret that will make you as slim, competent, alluring, or assertive as you think you should be. The pictures are so bright, the people so appealing, it's hard not to believe them.

You're doomed to disappointment, of course. Once you get home and settle down in a comfortable chair with a cup of tea, you look inside the glossy cover and discover the articles and ads are promoting a new deodorant or new lipstick color, or rehashing advice you've heard a hundred times before.

The headlines imply that if we hope to achieve lasting self-confidence, we must meet certain expectations and adopt certain values and attitudes. We must be out there aggressively proving our worth by conquering fat, keeping a mate, or impressing the boss.

Most of this advice sounds pretty good on the surface. Perhaps more than at any other time or place in history, people today want to feel comfortable and confident in every area of life: physically, socially, emotionally, and financially. We struggle with the daily business of trying to fit the different facets of our lives together — woman, friend, daughter, sister, wife, mother, employee, teacher, artist, nurturer, counselor — to respond to life's challenges with wisdom, joy, and dignity. Many of us are afflicted by a nagging sense of unworthiness. We feel we may never measure up, and we wonder why perfection is such an elusive target. Is this uneasiness what our lives are supposed to be all about?

Seeking and Finding

The search for self-worth is as old as the human race. Every century spawns new philosophies or religions and programs or plans for self-improvement. In recent decades we have been inundated with new techniques to expand human consciousness or restore the inner self. Talk shows feature guests promoting positive thinking, meditation, herbal remedies, or healthy eating as means of finding peace or a more satisfying life.

I can identify with what it means to seek a sense of purpose for life. For a long time I regularly attended yoga classes, read self-help books, and fine-tuned my lifestyle habits. The idea that thinking good thoughts and eating healthy foods could help me become a better person was genuinely appealing.

I discovered that meditating on empty images and phrases did nothing to help me understand who I was. My search continued beyond this journey of inner-self discovery into art, philosophy, and literature studies at a large urban university. Yet, even as I invested all this attention on my inner thoughts and attitudes, my soul remained restless. Somehow I sensed that life was grander, fuller, brighter than the Eastern mystical traditions portrayed it. I came to realize that, in order to know myself, I needed to know who had created me.

One sunny afternoon in mid-January, feeling overwhelmed by the emptiness of my life, I decided to stop trying to “find the light” according to the way I thought it should happen. I asked God to help me become the person He had created me to be, to teach me how to love and forgive the people in my life who had caused me pain, to help me live in a world where joy and suffering don’t always make sense.

Within a week of praying this prayer, I met two students on campus who asked if I wanted to know Jesus Christ. “Yes, I do!” was my unexpectedly enthusiastic reply. I discovered that God came to earth as a person, as Jesus, and that I can know Him personally.

I realized that I didn’t have to try to “find myself” or to create some source of value in my life. The source of my value is Jesus Himself. He knows me completely as I am, and His gift of unconditional love gives me worth no matter how I feel or how I look.

God helped me understand the importance of forgiveness. Jesus had come to earth as my substitute. He took all the brokenness onto Himself and died for me so that I could have new life. Because of Jesus, I know I am forgiven and through Him I can forgive others.

It was wonderfully strange to discover that Jesus was not a distant religious ideal but someone real whom I could know, serve, and love with my whole heart. It was as if the sun had come up for the first time and I was seeing life with new eyes.

Confident Women

In the 30 years that have passed since that unforgettable day, I have found that learning to live in God’s presence is a daily privilege, and continuing challenge, that more than satisfies my hungry soul.

In this booklet we will consider the stories of three women from three centuries who lived bold, courageous lives. Each were led to an unwavering source of identity and purpose and given the strength to do amazing things.

*“I don’t always know what the will of God is from day-to-day.
But this is where God has put me today, and so I want to be all there
and to put myself into what I’m doing and who I’m with. And to do
it with a grateful heart.”*

Pandita Ramabai (19th century)

Worth More than Face Value

Pandita Ramabai's life began in impoverished obscurity on an isolated plateau in southern India. Her father was a Hindu priest who belonged to the highest caste in southern India. He taught her the Hindu scriptures and trained her to become a Sanskrit scholar. By the age of 12, Ramabai had memorized 18,000 sacred Hindu verses and she eventually learned nine languages.

At an early age Ramabai accompanied her family on a spiritual pilgrimage. They visited temples throughout India and received offerings for reciting sacred Hindu prayers. In 1876 a terrible famine struck, killing her father, mother, and older sister. Ramabai and her brother, Srinivasa, continued the pilgrimage, covering more than 4,000 miles as they walked barefoot through India. "I cannot describe all the sufferings of this terrible time," she wrote in her journal. "My brother and I survived and wandered about, still visiting sacred places, bathing in rivers, and worshipping the gods and goddesses in order to get our desire ... After years of fruitless service we began to lose our faith in them."

As a primarily Hindu nation, Indian social and religious culture was based on the caste system. Each person belonged to a certain social class, or caste, by birth and could not move to another class. Reincarnation and karma (quality of action) were central to the caste system because Hinduism teaches that a person's soul is repeatedly incarnated in different life forms until the soul reaches perfection. When the soul attains perfection, it becomes part of Nirvana.

As Ramabai traveled India, she was disturbed by the plight of the countless "child widows," young women who had been cast out of their homes onto the streets or sacrificed in the fires of their dead husbands' cremation rites. Ramabai realized that Hinduism offered them no hope. "Child widows have no place in the abode of the gods and no hope of getting (spiritual) liberation, except perchance they might be born among the higher class after having gone through millions of reincarnations." Through attending Christian youth meetings, Ramabai discovered Christianity was different: "If you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved" (Romans 10:9).

In May 1880, Ramabai's brother died at the age of 21. Six months later, Ramabai married a lawyer named Bepin Bihari Medhavi, moved away from Calcutta, and had a daughter. After just 19 months of marriage, Bepin contracted cholera and died. "This great grief drew me to God," Ramabai wrote in her journal, later adding:

I do not know if any one of my readers has ever had the experience of being shut up in a room where there was nothing but thick darkness and then groping in it to find something of which he or she was in dire need. I can think of no one but a blind man, whose story is given in St. John chapter nine. He was born blind and remained so for forty years of his life; and then suddenly he found the Mighty One, who could give him eyesight. Who could have described his joy at seeing the daylight, where there had not been a particle of hope of his ever seeing it?

I looked to the blessed Son of God who was lifted up on the cross and there suffered death, even the death of the cross, in my stead, that I might be made free from the bondage of sin, and from the fear of death, and I received life. O the love, the unspeakable love of the Father for me, a lost sinner, which gave His only Son to die for me! I had not merited this love, but that was the very reason He showed it to me.

How good, how indescribably good! What good news for me a woman, a woman born in India, among Brahmins who hold out no hope for me and the like of me! The Bible declares that Christ did not reserve this great salvation for a particular caste or sex ... I had not to wait till after undergoing births and deaths for countless millions of times

when I should become a Brahmin man, in order to get to know the Brahma. And then, was there any joy and happiness to be hoped for? No, there was nothing but to be amalgamated into Nothingness.

The Holy Spirit made it clear to me from the Word of God that the salvation which God gives through Christ is present, and not something future. I believed it, I received it, and I was filled with joy.

Over time, Ramabai's faith became a profound comfort and motivating force in her life. She lectured and taught thousands of people, introducing many to the Christian faith for the first time. She also founded a mission to help women and children, called the Mukti Mission.

There were severe hardships over the years. Ramabai's work was persistently criticized; refugees brought devastating diseases; arsonists set fire to mission buildings; plague epidemics caused death and quarantine; famine struck repeatedly.

But Ramabai was reassured by this verse from the Bible: "*No weapon forged against you will prevail*" (Isaiah 54:17). Trusting God for everything and financing all the mission's operations without bank accounts, a stable budget, or endowments, Ramabai viewed "a few clothes and my Bible" as her only personal property.

She wrote: "We are not rich, not great, but we are happy, getting our daily bread directly from the loving hands of our Heavenly Father, having not a pice (Indian coin) over and above our daily necessities ... we have nothing to fear from anybody, nothing to lose, and nothing to regret. The Lord is our Inexhaustible Treasure."

In the last 15 years of her life, Ramabai completed a translation of the Christian Bible in the Indian peoples' language. She fell gravely ill while proofreading and correcting the translation's final draft, but lived just long enough to complete the project. The telegram announcing her death said simply: "Ramabai Promoted."

Judy Siegle (20th century)

A Different Kind of Success

On a hot and breezy August afternoon, Judy Siegle eases into her "racing chair" and wheels out to a local school track. She slides heavy, black mitts onto her hands, tightening them by pulling the straps with her teeth. Judy, physically challenged for 20 years, is able to grip things with her left hand, but not her right. So her teeth become "my third hand or my second hand," she says.

Judy leans forward, her chin nearly touching her knees, and pulls the racing chair into motion. The chair rolls faster and faster down the track as she bats the wheels' inner rims with her mitted hands. "You're supposed to be punching the rims," she would later explain. "Punching and punching them as fast as you can."

Arm-and-shoulder strength is essential and Judy's track practice is followed three days a week by weight training at a local fitness center. In mornings and evenings she often has to ice her forearms to help sore muscles recover. This is what it takes to train at an elite level, when the goal is the 2000 Paralympics.

Judy works half-days counseling patients with disabilities, and spends the rest of her hours training for the Paralympics and speaking to various schools and organizations.

"I feel like I've got a full life," Judy says. "I realize that a lot of people with disabilities don't have the opportunities I've had — a good education, a good support system, a great job. So I'm grateful for what I have."

Even before her accident, Judy was no stranger to overachievement. In high school, she participated in speech and track. She sang in the choir, played in the band, and captained the varsity football cheerleading squad. But it was on the basketball court where she was a star, named all-conference three years and all-state one year. After graduation in spring 1979, it was only natural that she'd enter her parents' alma mater. There she would look forward to playing college ball and perhaps trying her hand at coaching.

But plans change. On August 11, 1979, just weeks before the start of her freshman year, a horrific automobile crash left Judy with a broken neck and a concussion.

"As I look back on it," Judy says, "the concussion was a blessing. With my memory coming back gradually, there wasn't that sudden blow of being able-bodied one minute and looking at life in a wheelchair the next."

Judy's days were positive, but her nights were of another sort. Her emotional struggle with disability manifested itself through repeated nightmares. More weeks passed, and then, in a late-night conversation with her campus pastor, Judy found the peace she'd been searching for.

The pastor helped her understand that being a Christian didn't necessarily mean she wouldn't experience bouts of frustration and anger. But God was going with her and would give her the strength to meet the emotions and challenges that lay ahead. And the nightmares ended.

The road back was long, but in the summer of 1980 Judy attended her first classes at college and then returned full-time in the fall to start her freshman year.

Soon Judy was participating in wheelchair races all over the Midwest, training with some of the country's top coaches and setting more than a few national records in the 400-, 800-, 1,500-, and 5,000-meter events. Judy's "inner athlete" was rekindled. Downhill skiing in Colorado became a favorite activity. So did kayaking on Lake Superior. "It was kind of like all the doors started opening at once," Judy says with no small sense of wonder. "It was such a thrill for me because I wasn't aware that so many options for the disabled were out there."

Achieving goals — and setting examples — is much of what Judy Siegle is about. "We have so many opportunities for leading full lives — whether it's learning how to cook or expanding your vocabulary or being one of the top three quadriplegic women in the world in an athletic event. I love encouraging others who are physically challenged — encouraging them in life and encouraging them in faith."

"In my struggle for independence," Judy says, "I've learned a lot about my dependence on God."

Judy's life honors one of her favorite quotes, a passage from a book by Elisabeth Elliott: "Wherever you are, be all there. Live to the hilt every situation you believe to be the will of God."

When Judy recites the words, her admiration for them — her belief in them — is unmistakable in her voice. But she's quick to add, "I don't always know what the will of God is from day-to-day. But this is where God has put me today, and so I want to be all there and to put myself into what I'm doing and who I'm with. And to do it with a grateful heart."

Where does Judy get her strength? From God Himself. Through the power of the Holy Spirit she knows that "*nothing will be able to separate [her] from the love of God that is in Jesus Christ our Lord*" (Romans 8:39).

Vibia Perpetua (3rd century)

More than Just a Pretty Face

Vibia Perpetua lived in the Roman-occupied city of Carthage, in northern Africa. She was the beautiful, intelligent daughter of a wealthy nobleman and was among the first women in Carthage of her social rank to become a Christian.

When an edict issued in a.d. 202 by the Roman emperor made converting to Christianity illegal, Perpetua had to choose between either execution or denying her belief in Jesus Christ. She never strayed from her choice to proclaim what she believed was true.

Perpetua's resolve was made considerably more difficult by her close family ties. She faced great resistance from her father. He did everything he could to save her from execution, including threatening to beat Perpetua until she denounced Christianity. She assured him that nothing could convince her to turn away from her faith. "I (cannot) call myself anything else than what I am, a Christian." The next day Perpetua and her companions were seized by the authorities and thrown in prison.

On the day before she received her summons to testify before the Roman tribunal, Perpetua's father once again tried to avert her lethal course of action. Attempting to soothe her father's grief, Perpetua told him, "This will be done on that scaffold which God has willed; for know that we have been placed not in our own power but God's."

When Perpetua testified before the tribunal on the following day, confessing her Christian faith, her father was desperate. He rushed forward to help his daughter because he knew that her confession would lead to death. He was punished for his action, beaten with a rod. Perpetua wrote later that she suffered as if she herself had received the battering.

Perpetua and her companions were among the first people arrested, imprisoned, and sentenced under the emperor's new mandate. They were immediately condemned to face wild animals, then execution by a gladiator's sword.

The execution was set for March 7, 203 a.d. A collection of animals was specially prepared for the killings: bears, leopards, a wild boar for the men, and a crazed heifer for the women. Perpetua and her fellow Christian prisoners left the prison on execution day "joyfully as though they were on their way to heaven."

"If there was any trembling, it was from joy, not fear," reported an observer, who also wrote:

After being stripped and enmeshed in nets, the women were led into the arena ... Perpetua was tossed first and fell on her back. She sat up, and being more concerned with her sense of modesty than with her pain, covered her thighs with her gown which had been torn down one side. Then finding her hair-clip which had fallen out, she pinned back her loose hair, thinking it not proper for a martyr to suffer with disheveled hair; it might seem that she was mourning in her hour of triumph. Then she stood up. Noticing that (her friend) Felicitas was badly bruised, she went to her, reaching out her hands, and helping her to her feet.

In the midst of her execution, Perpetua asked to speak to her brother. She encouraged him to hold onto his Christian faith and to tell their family to love one another without allowing "our suffering to keep them from the faith."

With the onlookers urging the martyrs forward, an eyewitness observed:

When the crowd demanded that the prisoners be brought out into the open so that they might feast their eyes on death by the sword, (the prisoners) voluntarily arose and moved where the crowd wanted them ... The others, without making a sound, were killed by the sword ... but Perpetua, in order to feel some of the pain, groaning as she was struck between the ribs, took the gladiator's trembling hand and guided it to her throat. Perhaps it was that so great a woman, feared as she was by the unclean spirit, could not have been slain had she herself not willed it.

Perpetua's martyrdom soon became famous among Christians everywhere. After her burial in Carthage, the news of her heroic surrender spread rapidly across the empire.

Living with True Confidence

These three different women, with three distinct lifestyles, found three different ways of living with confidence.

Pandita Ramabai persevered through tragedy and many obstacles because she knew the real source of her worth. Her society believed that, as a woman, she had very little value. Hinduism taught her to strive for good karma and hope to be reincarnated higher up the ladder toward Nirvana. But Ramabai discovered she was worth more than that. She learned that God loved her in His Son, Jesus Christ, who died and rose again to forgive her wrongdoing and give her eternal life. She discovered that God declared her priceless, and loved her without limit. Her faith in God's love propelled her into a life of service and love for others.

Judy Siegle had ambitious plans as a young woman, but then faced unexpected tragedy that not only disrupted her plans but literally knocked her flat on her back. But Judy didn't accept defeat. She found new ways to live a fulfilling life. "In my struggle for independence, I've learned a lot about my dependence on God," she said. The source of Judy's confidence to persevere and find fulfillment was her trust in the promises of God.

Vibia Perpetua could have lived a comfortable, easy life. She was beautiful, smart, wealthy, well-born. There were probably a lot of people in Carthage who envied her situation. But when Perpetua discovered that the God who created the universe had come to earth in the form of a human being because He loved her, it changed her life. She was willing to give up everything — her family, her position, her wealth, her life — because God loved her without condition. She was confident that her life had value and that it mattered how she lived it.

Each of these women knew that God loved her without condition and had given His Son, Jesus, to pay for her wrongdoing and bring her to God. No matter what others thought of her, no matter how she thought of herself, God had declared her perfect and priceless through His Son.

Paul, the author of several books of the Bible, wrote that, "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!" (2 Corinthians 5:17). God doesn't just clean you up and rinse you off. He makes you brand new.

Writer Anne Lamott describes it this way:

This process... (is) about giving up the dubious comfort of the earthly, of human appearances where everything works or seems to. It's about giving up on the superficial, in order to go way down below. It's about the willingness or necessity of being wiped out of what you think holds you together, to face a benevolent annihilation, without all the stuff that you think defines you, the stuff where we live, which we think is reality. Because you have to give up some false stuff to get to the true.

The “true stuff” is that God loves you and has designed you for a special purpose. You are His unique creation, one of a kind, with special gifts and talents. The truth is that God recreates you through Jesus and makes you the person He designed you to be: full of love, joy, peace, and confidence.

Confidence is ...

True confidence doesn't come from your looks (that don't last) or your money (that you can't take with you) or your job (that isn't guaranteed tomorrow) or even from peace you find within yourself. True confidence comes from knowing that through Jesus Christ, God loves you without condition, without limit, no matter what. Through His love, you become the amazing woman you were born to be.

But because of His great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions — it is by grace you have been saved. And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with Him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, in order that in the coming ages He might show the incomparable riches of His grace, expressed in His kindness to us in Christ Jesus. (Ephesians 2:4-7)

I sometimes meditate by writing a poem like the one that follows. I pray that it might also capture your thoughts as you consider God's immeasurable love for you in Jesus Christ.

*Lord, Your love for me is
beautiful,
remarkable,
and eternal.*

*Believing that You love me
so completely
requires me
to let go
of the things that pull me
away from You.*

*Only when I take my eyes
off myself and look to You
do I begin to see the big picture.*

*Teach me to stop and listen
when I get too busy
to hear Your voice.*

*Forgive me for wandering
far from You.*

*Keep bringing me back,
again and again,
by Your truth and life.*

*May I praise Your name
each morning
giving You thanks
for remaining with me
as I walk through the day
You have planned.*

My times are in Your hand.

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