

Introduction

A round, brilliant-cut diamond reflects the most light of all the cuts of diamonds in the world. The formula for the brilliant cut, also known as the Tolkowsky cut, is designed so that the diamond reflects up to 92 percent of the light that shines into its dozens of facets. This incredible and breathtaking reflection of light makes the round, brilliant cut a very popular choice for men when they are seeking out the perfect engagement ring.

Like a brilliant-cut diamond, our lives as young women of faith have dozens of facets. We are expected to juggle school, family, relationships, faith, activities, drama, our appearance, social life, friendships, community, and more. Not only are we expected to juggle these things, but we are expected to juggle them all well, even though we are never given an instruction manual on how to execute this! It is not easy! In the center of the many aspects of life as a happy, healthy, and virtuous young woman lies our identity in Christ, our identity as daughters of God. We are to keep this at the center of all that we do, but this is no simple endeavor. It is, however, a worthwhile one. When we are consistently aware of the core of who we are—daughters of the almighty God—we let God's love flow into every aspect of our lives, and we begin to reflect *his* light. We begin to let his

radiant love shine through the darkness of our broken world. We become the women he created us to be, and through this, we begin to look much like a brilliant, illuminated diamond.

It is impossible to cover every facet of womanhood in any forty-five-minute talk I present to a group of women. There are so many things to cover in talking about womanhood in its entirety. So, I have compiled many of the topics that are important for women to talk about in this book. I want to open up conversations among women about how we can find balance in our lives and how we can make decisions that reflect our dignity and worth, as well as strengthen us to live out our femininity in the way God designed us to. I want to create actionable points that we can incorporate into our daily lives, as I also share my own journey as a young woman of faith to encourage, inspire, and help you on your journey. I want to help you believe in yourself more. I want to help you recognize that you are braver and stronger than you probably think you are. You are my sister in Christ, and I want you to feel me cheering you on as we unpack these facets of womanhood.

The goal of this book is not to tell you how to live, and I do not and never will promise to have all the answers to all of life's questions, but I did survive high school and college trying my very best to pursue virtue and live my life as a young woman of faith and joy, and I can speak to that. I can offer you my witness. I can share my own experience that magnifying God in my choices, in the way I treat others, and in the way I treat myself is tremendously difficult but altogether possible for me and for you. Many of the things in this book are very challenging to live

out; if it was easy to live virtue wholeheartedly, everyone would be doing it. Why? Because a life of virtue and of choosing to follow Christ is a gateway to living as a woman who embodies peace and joy—and our world certainly needs more peaceful, joyful, and radiant women.

I have found that bravery is the main component required for living as a young woman of faith in our world today. If you want to live virtue and proclaim a wholehearted faith in your words and actions, you have to be bold. You have to be brave. It takes courage to uphold a high set of values, to share your love for God in a world in which faith is extremely unpopular, and to go against the flow. It takes courage to let go of worrying about what other people may think or say about you and to follow the path that God lights before you. It is not popular to love Jesus and to follow him with your whole heart. It is not easy to choose faith continually, and it is challenging to live the bravery that our faith requires of us, but I have some ideas on how we can make it easier on ourselves.

My hope is that as you read this book, you will feel as though you and I are sitting together at a coffee shop, having long, wonderful conversations about the joys and struggles of womanhood. It would be a delight for me to be able to have coffee with you because I am a woman with struggles and questions just like you, trying to juggle everything well and to love Jesus well at the same time. We are in this together. I want to invite you on this journey with me, and I pray that you will have an open heart to what God wants to reveal to you and stir up in your heart through these pages. May you and I both have an openness to

the ways he wants us to reflect his light and his love—and go bravely forward in our world, living as the radiant, courageous women God so carefully and lovingly created us to be.

ONE

Go Bravely

Throughout the first few years of high school, I didn't know what I wanted to "do" with my life. There were endless possibilities of careers to choose from, and I didn't know which one I was most passionate about. I signed up for an elective video-production class on a whim my senior year, thinking it would be fun. I had no idea that class would change the course of my life forever.

Through this class and the passion of my wonderful teachers, Mr. and Mrs. Gillen, I became very drawn to the field of journalism, video, and media. I began to have lofty dreams of becoming a sports reporter for ESPN after spending many memorable Sundays and Monday nights watching football with my dad while growing up. I began to research colleges with prestigious journalism schools, and one school that kept coming up in my research was Arizona State University in Tempe, Arizona. ASU boasted the best journalism school on the West Coast and was very affordable compared to most of the other schools on my list, so I went on a fun visit in the spring with my dad and felt it was a great fit for me. I applied, was accepted, and after having

attended small private schools my entire life, I set out for ASU, a place where young people of faith were an extreme minority. It was unconventional, and somewhat confusing to people, that I chose to attend a large public school, well known for its party scene, as a young woman who loved God and wanted to follow him.

Throughout high school, I chose to live my faith and dedicated myself to making good choices and trying to follow Christ in every aspect of my life. Attending Arizona State, however, required a bravery that I had not anticipated in continuing on this path. Stepping onto my college campus was a massive shift from everything that I was accustomed to in the small, intimate communities I had grown up in. Faith life was not prevalent at all, but in the beginning of my freshman year, I found a chapel on my campus. It was an interfaith chapel located in the center of campus, called the Danforth Chapel, and it was conveniently located within a two-minute walk from my dorm. Every day a priest from the Newman Center would come to celebrate a Catholic Mass in this chapel at 11:40 a.m., and this fit in my schedule, so I tried to attend every day, as it was something my mother raised me to love by taking me to church every day with her as a child. The most difficult part of getting to this Mass on campus, however, had nothing to do with scheduling difficulties: *The biggest challenge was mustering up the bravery to walk through the door of the chapel when I knew everyone around could see me going in to pray.*

There were days when I felt utterly embarrassed to be living my faith and to be seen walking through those doors to a Mass

that was attended by a maximum of twelve people on a crowded day. As a young woman who was active in youth group in high school, I couldn't believe the difficulty of this one small act on some days. Each time I put my hand on the doorknob and felt self-conscious about going in to pray, I began to say a simple prayer quietly but out loud: "Jesus, help me to be brave." I did it again and again—every day for months—and it was through the act of opening this door every day that I learned a lesson that I tucked away in my heart for the rest of my life: *Sometimes even the smallest acts of living out faith require great bravery.*

Bravery is not the absence of fear but the ability to conquer our fears and choose to do the right thing. To be a brave woman of faith is to make decisions that bring us closer to God, even though these decisions can often be difficult or uncomfortable. If you've ever stood in a river or an ocean with a strong current, you know how difficult it is to move your legs to walk against that current. That feeling is synonymous with the challenge of living life as a young woman of faith at a large university. I felt the tension of walking against the current on most days, and it would have been easy to give up and let myself be picked up by the current of what was accepted and "normal." I would not have stood out for being the "good girl." I would have blended into the crowd along with everyone else. Nobody would have asked me questions about why I stayed home on the weekends rather than going out to parties or why I put in all the effort to bike to church on Sundays. But somehow—with the help of a mighty God who walked beside me through it all—I kept living bravely.

The bravery that I was called to live beyond opening that chapel door was the bravery to live a life that was radically different from what my college campus was advocating as normal and accepted. I was surrounded by my peers, the majority of whom were often drunk, high, or sleeping around on many nights. I was living my faith, maintaining my core values, trying to make good choices, and doing everything I could to stay close to God. I couldn't have been living a more radically different life than a majority of the people around me, and the more I lived a completely different life, the more difficult it was to be brave, because this bravery made way for moments, days, and weeks of painful loneliness. I was trying to be brave, but I felt like an outcast. People made sure that I knew I was a misfit among my peers, and I realized very quickly that feelings of loneliness can very easily convince anyone that being brave isn't worth the trouble.

Those feelings of loneliness made every attempt to convince me that it's not worth it to be brave in this world, that it's not worth it to live differently, that it would be easier to give up on trying to walk against the current and instead just go with the flow. My loneliness was very loud in its attempts to get me to quit. So in order to combat these feelings of loneliness and of being an outcast, I derived my strength from my relationship with God. In all the difficulty of being courageous, I continually asked God for the strength to do it. I visited the chapel frequently to pray. I persisted in asking him to help me stay strong in going against the flow with that simple little prayer, "Jesus, help me to be brave." I continually asked him to walk with me, to give me the strength to open the door to the chapel, to help me decline

friendly invitations to places or events that would lead me away from him. He did.

As I have done my best to live my faith, I have come to see that bravery inspires bravery. Have you ever been inspired by the bravery of another woman you know? I have multiple women in my life who have become my role models because of the way they bravely live their lives and their faith. Everyone has a different definition of the term “role model,” but I believe that a role model is someone who declares to others simply by their actions: “If I can do it, you can, too.” You can be a role model to the women around you by your bravery. Perhaps your gut reaction to that thought is to say, “No way.” Yes, way. This requires stepping out of the huddle, out of the groups of people in social circles who are terrified to live in a way that may make them look different or foolish to their peers. Yes, it can be very difficult at times, but you have all the bravery needed to live out your faith and make good choices for yourself because the God, the author of all strength and bravery, is fighting for you, defending you, and *with* you in every moment (see Exodus 14:14).

You will have moments and seasons when you feel very different from others if you are living your faith in this millennium—there is no way around that. You may continually feel as though you are walking against a strong current, perpetually going against the flow of the world. But you will be called to push through in the moments, seasons, and even years when you feel like an outcast in a world where you do not belong. If you choose to live a life as a strong, faithful, loving, self-respecting woman, you can be a role model to the women around you to

show them that it is possible to live such a life, that it is beautiful to live such a life, that it is truly and deeply fulfilling to live such a life. You can inspire the women around you to think quietly in their hearts, most especially in the moments of great difficulty: *If she can do it, I can, too.*

There will be small moments and massive moments in which you will be called by your faith to be brave. Use that prayer, again and again, as many times as you need to, in the moments when you feel like quitting because something or someone is trying to convince you it's too hard: "Jesus, help me to be brave."

May Jesus help us, always and in everything, to live a bravery derived from his heart and his strength. I pray he helps each of us to persevere, and to always choose the path that will outwardly reflect his light and his love.



TAKE ACTION

Consider what the word "brave" means to you.

Reflect on these questions:

- What does it mean to be brave?
- Do you feel that you are a brave person?