

WHAT IS A GIRL WORTH?

One Woman's Courageous Battle to
Protect the Innocent and Stop a Predator—
No Matter the Cost

RACHAEL
DENHOLLANDER

Powerful. . . . Denhollander's brave and detailed memoir serves as a clear-eyed look into a disturbing case of sexual abuse that gained national attention.

PUBLISHERS WEEKLY (starred review)

Treating a sensitive topic with unflinching truth, respect, and fair-mindedness, *What Is a Girl Worth?* fuses biblical notions with legal insights, personal journal entries, and heartbreaking data to make a lucid argument regarding the power of a single voice to inspire a chorus.

FOREWORD REVIEWS

Rachael Denhollander is a hero. She chose to speak her truth when it was painful, difficult, and certainly not the “comfortable” route to take. By doing so, she has played a significant role in making our beautiful sport safer and in protecting the livelihoods of countless child athletes. I will always stand beside her in solidarity and admiration, and I applaud her for taking the additional step of telling more of her story with this book. I know firsthand how challenging that can be, and I thank her for her courage.

DOMINIQUE MOCEANU, *New York Times* bestselling author and Olympic gold medalist

As men, we're taught not to be afraid, not to ask for help, not to be victims. And so when abuse happens to us, we feel powerless to fight it. That's my own story, but with God's help, I've learned a better way. And through *What Is a Girl Worth?*, we can all learn how to walk together toward a safer, brighter future. Do not miss this incredible true story of Rachael Denhollander, the woman who stopped an abuser. She is a living example of grace and strength in the fight against evil, and I'm standing by her side.

TERRY CREWS, actor

This is one of the most important books you'll ever read.

BETH MOORE, *New York Times* bestselling author and sexual abuse survivor

Rachael Denhollander stared down evil and changed the world. Parts of her memoir are heartbreaking, but it is ultimately uplifting, a story of faith, courage, and love. Rachael has become known internationally, but this book goes so much deeper than anything that has been said about her. It is a riveting memoir.

MARK ALESIA, reporter who first interviewed Rachael for the *Indianapolis Star*

I was utterly inspired by Rachael even before reading her memoir. But reading the story behind the story further cements my belief that this woman is a hero in every sense of the word. The courage it took to come forward and bring Larry Nassar to justice is amplified by the struggle it took to get to that point. Her willingness to put herself in harm's way to protect future generations drove her to speak out even when she thought the world might not hear her. This unflinching narrative, replete with the harrowing details of the impact of abuse and the traumatic emotional aftermath, is an act of bravery in and of itself.

JENNIFER SEY, 1986 national gymnastics champion, seven times national team member, and author of the bestseller *Chalked Up: My Life in Elite Gymnastics*

Rachael's account of her abuse shatters our certainties. A well-loved and protected child is abused by those assumed to be good. Hearing such stories makes us want to deceive ourselves. We want to look away and deny. Rachael teaches us clearly that deceit—not truth—is our enemy. The hard truth of her story brings light and hope. May we, like Rachael, have the courage to listen to the God of all truth as He teaches us through her words and her life.

DIANE LANGBERG, PhD, psychologist

No two sexual abuse cases are exactly alike, yet Rachael Denhollander's story reveals what they all have in common and the part we all can play in preventing abuse, defending the vulnerable, and pursuing justice. *What Is a Girl Worth?* is a must-read for anyone who cares about protecting precious lives from predators and pursuing justice for those for whom we were too late.

KAREN SWALLOW PRIOR, author of *On Reading Well: Finding the Good Life through Great Books* and *Fierce Convictions: The Extraordinary Life of Hannah More—Poet, Reformer, Abolitionist*

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The names and distinguishing details of some people in this book have been changed to protect their privacy.

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For every survivor
from every background and identity,
those who came before,
those yet to come,
and those who are no longer with us.

It is not your fault.

It is not your shame.

You are believed.

May you know how much you are worth.

Author's Note

This account is my record of the events that led me to speak out against my own abuser and expose the harm done by perpetrators, as well as the damage that follows when institutions minimize or ignore abuse. I have changed some names and identifying details to protect the privacy of individuals. While describing events, I relied not only on my memory but on my personal correspondence, media reports, court transcripts, and medical and legal records. As with any memoir, this version of my story is uniquely my own.

Prologue

August 4, 2016
10:32 a.m.

To whom it may concern . . .

I DIDN'T EXPECT TO BE WRITING AN EMAIL that morning. With three children under five, I wanted, and needed, to spend my daytime hours savoring the simple, rich delights of my kids—and getting in a few hours of my own work whenever I could. My husband, Jacob, was a full-time graduate student and held down a job, so he was rarely home before dinner.

That morning, looking for the grocery list I'd typed up the night before, I logged into my laptop. As it happens, I had left my Facebook tab open. That's when I saw it—a trending news story posted just a few hours earlier: “A Blind Eye to Sex Abuse: How USA Gymnastics Failed to Report Cases.”

There's a shocker, I thought. My husband and I had been appealing to church leaders over a similar issue involving another church they had been supporting, and the wound felt very fresh. I glanced around to make sure my five-year-old son, already a fluent reader, was nowhere nearby, and I clicked the link. What I read filled me with a grief I can't express: USA Gymnastics had been systematically burying reports of sexual misconduct in a filing cabinet—complaints about fifty-four member coaches over ten years—and some of those coaches

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had gone on to abuse little girls for years.¹ I wanted to cry. I knew all too well what those precious children had endured.

At the bottom of the article was this notice: “*IndyStar* will continue to investigate this topic.” The reporters had provided an email address where readers could send tips. My stomach turned. At that moment I was certain of two things.

First, I was right. The United States of America Gymnastics (USAG) had been burying sexual abuse cases to save face. *If they protected their coaches*, I’d reasoned, *they absolutely would have protected him. They would never have listened to me.*

And second, this was the moment for which I had been waiting and watching for nearly sixteen years. Someone had blown the whistle on how USAG handled sex abuse. That meant someone had spoken up. More important, that person had been *believed*. And the article was trending. That meant the public was paying attention.

Right then and there, with my teething baby bundled on my back, I broke my steadfast rule about emailing during the day. As I bounced back and forth to keep baby Ellianna calm, I typed:

I am emailing to report an incident. . . . I was not molested by my coach, but I was molested by Dr. Larry Nassar, the team doctor for USAG. I was fifteen years old.

I paused for a second. I knew exactly what it would mean for me and my family if the *IndyStar* team decided to pick up the story. I’d known for years what the cost would be. But it had to be done, and if it wasn’t done now, it might never happen.

I have the medical records showing my treatment. . . . They are in a file cabinet at my parents’ house, which is several hours away.

I knew my evidence was scant, but I could tell by the way the *IndyStar* investigation had been done that these reporters understood the dynamics of sexual assault, what evidence looks like, and what patterns are often in place. They had seen the dark underbelly of USAG because they had believed the

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survivors of the coaches' abuse. Still . . . I knew what it felt like to speak up and be dismissed.

I did not ever report Nassar to anyone, except my own coach, some years later. . . . I was told not to tell the owner of the gym . . . it would come back on me. I decided against going to the police . . . it was my word against his. . . . I was confident I would not be believed.

I looked around my kitchen. We'd barely finished breakfast, and I was writing an email that—if it did what I needed it to do—would completely upend our lives. I gave myself a mental shake, firmly pushed down the fear and nausea, and typed two final sentences:

I have seen little hope that any light would be shed by coming forward, so I have remained quiet. If there is a possibility that is changing, I will come forward as publicly as necessary.

Then I hit Send.

1

“WHY DIDN'T YOU SAY SOMETHING SOONER?”

I have been asked that question more times than I can count. Sometimes it is motivated by a genuine desire to understand, and sometimes it's articulated like a weapon, casting doubt over whether my abuse even occurred. The truth is, I *did* say something sooner—many of us did. But as survivors of sexual assault will tell you, saying something is one thing. Being heard—and believed—is another.

Bullies and predators prey on the defenseless. They count on victims being unable to protect themselves. More important, they count on *everyone else* being too afraid to confront them. I hate injustice, but I hate silence and apathy in the face of injustice even more. Far too often, bullies' belief that no one will challenge them is both well-founded and devastating for the people they target. But it doesn't have to be this way.

I have always had a strong sense of justice and a desire to protect others. Once when I was around seven, my mom took me, my little brother, Joshua, and my little sister, Bethany, to McDonald's for a playdate with friends.

This particular restaurant had a play area with a ball pit, winding tubes,

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and a twisting slide guaranteed to administer a near-lethal static shock the moment you sat down and—by the time you reached the bottom—to turn even the tamest hair into a spot-on replica of Albert Einstein's.

The tunnels and ball pit were my favorite parts of the play area. So many adventures could be imagined amidst the plastic twisting labyrinth—so much “scope for imagination.”² (Anne of Green Gables meets Ronald McDonald?)

I was hard at work scoping out the plastic tunnels for enemy invaders when I saw it. Just below me, through one of the plastic windows covered in greasy fingerprints, I noticed a boy about my age kicking my brother and sister.

A fierce wave of emotion enveloped me. As the oldest and strongest, I knew what my job was—to *protect those who couldn't protect themselves*. I had known it from the moment my mom brought my baby brother home from the hospital when I was about two and a half. It was one of those moments that seems completely unremarkable, and yet to this day, it stands out in my memory.

My baby brother was brand-new, and the most amazing tiny person I could imagine. I wanted so badly to take care of Joshua that my mom let me “help” with diaper changes, explaining every step of the process. And it was a process. In 1987, cloth diapers weren't today's fancy preformed ones with snaps, pockets, and inserts. They were the old-fashioned kind that you had to fold and pin on with enormous safety pins. I remember as if it were yesterday my mom teaching me how to do it—showing me how to fold the cloth to make the correct shape, where the diaper should fall on the baby's little belly, and how to check the legs to make sure the diaper was fitting properly. Then she did something that was forever burned in my mind. She tucked her index and middle finger under the edges where the diaper met and said, “Always remember to put your fingers between the diaper and the baby, *exactly* where you are going to push the pin through. That way, if the pin slips and someone gets hurt, it's the mom and not the baby.

“The most important thing, Rachael,” she had said, “is to keep the little ones safe.” And my mom did that by sacrificing herself.

Then she outfitted me with my own set of cloth diapers and pins and let me practice on my Cabbage Patch doll. Every time I changed its diaper, I did

it just as she'd shown me, folding it precisely, checking my doll's position on the diaper, and inspecting the leg openings. Then I'd put my fingers between the diaper and my doll, turn the fold over to make sure my fingers were in the right spot, take a deep breath, and push the pin through. And do you know what? I never once poked my doll. Of course, every time I practiced, I felt a twinge of concern that I'd jab my finger with that pin. But I just kept reminding myself, *The most important thing is to protect the baby. That's my job.*

Five years later at McDonald's, that instinct was every bit as strong.

That's my job.

I scrambled down the slide as fast as I could, not even trying to avoid the shock-inducing metal bolts, and ran over to the older boy. I reached my siblings in record time, and without hesitating, grabbed the bully's wrists. I pulled him away from my siblings and held my arms stiff to keep my body away from his swinging foot. He glared at me and tried to free his wrists, yelling for me to let go. I took a deep breath and quietly held on. I didn't strike back; I just felt fiercely protective and resolved. I made sure to look the boy squarely in the eyes as I spoke firmly and calmly.

"Stop. You're hurting them, and you're old enough to know better. If you try to hurt anyone again, I'll go find a grown-up."

He tried to fight back. I held on.

"Stop," I repeated. "You're old enough to know better."

Angrily he paused and then grunted a defiant "Fine."

My siblings were now out of reach, so I let go and the boy stomped away. My mom and the mother of our friends, who had looked up from their table outside the play area to see me holding the boy's wrists, made it to the door and popped their heads in.

"Is everything okay?" my mother called out.

I glanced over my shoulder at the boy, now sulking in the distance.

"We're fine," I assured her.

We went back to playing, and I was filled with relief. My siblings weren't hurt. I'd done my job. I had used what I'd been given—my age, my strength, and my words—to protect them.

I knew what to do that day because I'd been explicitly taught that you always have a right to defend yourself and others. My parents even gave me

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specific guidelines for what speaking up should look like and had me practice, so if I ever did need to speak up, I would know exactly what to do and say.

“You always have a right to defend yourself and others,” they had said, “but never ever lash out in anger. Don’t become what you are fighting. Do only what is necessary to keep everyone safe.”

In other words, my motivation needed to be love—not anger, not revenge—which meant doing only what was necessary to restrain without a desire to harm the other person.

They also taught me that often kids who act out are angry and hurting, so it was important to feel compassion for them too. They told me to tell bullies the truth and remind them that they could, and *should*, be better—that they were responsible for their choices. And they told me to seek the help of an authority figure rather than angrily mete out my own form of justice.



Given these early lessons from my parents—as well as the fact that I was incredibly stubborn and argumentative if I felt I was in the right—I don’t think my mom and dad were surprised when, at age eight, I announced that I wanted to become an attorney someday so I could protect families and children. I drew up my first “contract” not long afterward.

I had determined one afternoon that my mother was spending too much time on the phone helping a friend through a crisis and not enough time helping me with my math homework. I vividly remember my frustration. I knew her discussions were important, but goodness, if she expected me to do my math, she had to hold up her end of the bargain! We simply had to have some concrete, definable boundaries in this household. So in exasperation, I found a piece of paper and a pencil and sat down to fix this problem. Righteous indignation burning within me, I drew up a contract. I outlined an agreement in which she would pledge to spend a specified, limited amount of time on the phone and a required amount of time helping me with my math. In exchange, I would complete my lessons. Then I drew two lines at the bottom—a place for each of us to sign—and brought it to her. I got my point across. In the future, my math lessons were completed in a timely manner, and my parents continued to opine that law was a natural career choice for me.

I was blessed to have parents who recognized that stubbornness, properly directed, becomes perseverance and determination. As my mom would often remind me, our greatest weaknesses are also often our greatest strengths—if we direct them properly. So rather than attempting to squelch this part of my personality, they taught me how to channel it and use it to my advantage. Most important, they taught me to check my motivations. Was I fighting for something because I just wanted to win—even if I was technically right—or was I fighting for something because I loved God and other people? If all I wanted was to be right and win, I would ultimately be motivated by arrogance, and I would be tempted to compromise, bend or twist facts, manipulate, and maybe even ignore parts of the truth. If I were motivated solely by the desire to triumph, my gifts could become dangerous to others, and ultimately, to myself. But the safeguard against this, they told me, was to be motivated instead by love.

Love would ensure a willingness to hear and see the truth, even if it meant admitting I was wrong. Love would ensure compassion even for those who did wrong, while still enabling fierce pursuit of the truth. To that end, I was given the tools for speaking up early and often, and I was given permission to use them.

So I did.

The idea many people want to cling to—that survivors just don't know how to speak up—simply isn't true. It's a notion we need to let go of and instead do a better job understanding what really keeps victims silent.

A common thread in the societal response to abuse is the argument “I'm not saying it was her fault; I'm just saying I'd have responded differently.” It feels safer to believe abuse happens only to people who “let it.” But this is in fact blaming the victim, because it implies that if victims had just responded differently, they could have stopped the abuse. This myth needs to be abandoned, and we need to make an effort to better understand why survivors don't speak up during, or even after, abuse.

The truth is, I had the tools I needed, and I knew how to use them from an early age. Yet when the time came, they were not enough to help me be heard and be believed.