

foreword by ANN VOSKAMP

*rhinestone*



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SAYING YES TO GOD  
*when sparkly, safe faith  
is no longer enough*

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KRISTEN WELCH

— Author of *We Are THAT Family* blog —

Kristen Welch is a woman who lives and loves with a rare authenticity that's contagious. She knows what it's like to feel weary from the weight of religion and what it's like to fall passionately in love with Jesus in a whole new way. She'll help you do the latter on the pages that follow. Get ready for more mercy, courage, and grace in your life.

**HOLLEY GERTH**

Bestselling author of *You're Already Amazing*

All of our excuses have met their match. Kristen tells the beautiful story of a God-sized dream called Mercy House, a story that began when Kristen and her family said yes. Read this book and be inspired to stop second-guessing whether your God-sized dream can ever come true. It can. It absolutely can.

**DEIDRA RIGGS**

Founder, JumpingTandem; managing editor, *The High Calling*

A delightfully honest read for anyone who ever wondered if her small yes matters. Kristen's words will wake you up from the American Dream you never even knew you were sleeping through.

**MYQUILLYN SMITH**

Author of *The Nesting Place*

Get ready to take a trip back to the time when you used to dream big. Kristen Welch will introduce you to that girl once again. Her journey of faith and daily courage will inspire you. Who knows how this book will change the direction of your life!

**ARLENE PELLICANE**

Speaker and author of *31 Days to Becoming a Happy Wife*





RHINESTONE JESUS





*rhinestone*  
**JESUS**

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KRISTEN WELCH



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## FOREWORD

You can lose your rhinestones, and it can feel like someone just lifted a millstone that's been breaking your neck.

Yeah—lose a rhinestone or two and you lose the rock that's been weighing you down.

Kristen Welch turns a corner in her life and finds her face right up against what she never expected: Was Jesus an accessory to her life? Or the only thing necessary?

This is a story of one woman, one mom, who decided to simply say yes to doing the next thing in front of her—and discovered the startling truth:

*Small Yeses to the Next Thing translate to Huge Yeses and New Things in the Kingdom of God.*

Changing the world started with changing her words. Instead of saying, “No, I could never do that” she started saying, “Yes, God could even do that—through even me.”

It wasn't that she thought she was a woman who could really do something big—but that she really believed God could do anything big with anyone willing.

Kristen and I have sat together several times. I've leaned forward to hear the heartbeat of Jesus in her quiet words. I've heard the tremble in her voice. I've listened to her honest laugh, her understated, brazen vulnerability. I've watched her face tell this story—the story of deciding that she didn't want her life to be about just getting by, just getting through. That's the thing: they say that life's just about

putting one step in front of the other. But the real truth is, sometimes there is no way through anymore, no more just taking one step in front of the other. Sometimes the only way through is by taking wild leaps of faith.

I've been captivated by just that in Kristen's life. There's nothing like it—to witness the raw beauty of a woman who really lives into the fullness of wild faith. There is no really living without really saying yes. Without really taking one step that is actually a leap.

There comes a moment in every woman's life when something she was tightly holding on to—just slips from her hands. Sometimes it's a dream. Sometimes it's a place . . . a person . . . a purpose. Sometimes it's the life you always thought you'd be living.

And you find yourself standing in front of the mirror, realizing that the faith you've been pulling on every day doesn't seem to be enough.

What happens when you look yourself right in the eye and realize, *I'm not living like just Jesus is enough for me.*

What happens when you realize that, really? You actually want a lot more than just Jesus.

That's the moment when the rhinestone falls, clatters, across the floor.

That's the moment you find yourself invited into endless diamond fields of real faith.

The actual Kingdom of God.

This book in your hands is your invitation to The Real More.

So the whole Body of Christ could look into the mirror and see it right there in the eyes, in all of our eyes . . .

a shimmer that is genuine Jesus.

*Ann Voskamp*

Board member for Mercy House Kenya;  
author of the *New York Times* bestsellers *One Thousand Gifts*:  
*A Dare to Live Fully Right Where You Are* and *The Greatest Gift*

# INTRODUCTION

WE THINK BIG IN TEXAS. When I was in high school, I was ready to change the world for God. I wasn't sure what that was going to look like or exactly how I was going to do it, but I was certain it would happen. People could see I was a Christian because I pinned on my sparkly symbol of faith, my rhinestone "Jesus" pin, nearly every day; my identity was pretty hard to miss. For the most part, I lived up to the ideal, not doing anything that would taint my good-girl reputation.

I met my husband, Terrell, in Bible school. He loved people and had placed his life in God's hands, too, to lead him where he could make the most impact for the Kingdom. Together we took ministry positions in the church, and our family began to grow. And then a series of incidents suddenly made our simple life and sincere dream to make a difference more complicated and increasingly out of our grasp. Some days time flew by and on other days it seemed to stand still. Suddenly I was thirty years old, raising babies and feeling exhausted and tired of life. Terrell was feeling the pressure of providing for our family and struggling with whether the job he had at the church was really the place God wanted him to be.

I was weighed down by sadness because I had stopped dreaming of changing the world for God. I was just trying my best to survive it.

One night Terrell said, “We used to be dreamers. *What happened to us?*”

Well, life happened.

I spent my days wishing for better ones, fantasizing about the future. But I also began second-guessing my worth, my ability to accomplish anything other than dealing with dirty diapers and tackling the mountain of laundry that never seemed to shrink.

And then Terrell helped me begin dreaming again when he brought home a laptop and encouraged me to write. I had always loved telling stories. Jotting down my thoughts helped me process the ups and downs of life, and I believed it was a gift God had given me. It had gotten pushed aside for years, so I was a little rusty. But the stories I had accumulated in my heart were still there. Starting a blog was a relief.

Oh, don't get me wrong. Life wasn't suddenly a fairy tale. There were still a lot of disappointments and hard times ahead. There were days filled with the exhaustion that comes from puke and poop, drama and bad attitudes. There were job changes and financial worries. I went to hell and back in my marriage, and fought my way to love. I was poor; I was rich. I had good intentions and failed. I had given up on my dreams.

But I slowly discovered that God didn't require me to get my act together before He would reveal His God-sized dream; He was just waiting for me to say yes to Him in my mess. I was about to learn that's when His power proves most effective.

Yes, this is my story of a discarded dream that was restored.

But it's also permission for you to dream again. I hope you will also be inspired to think about offering God the gift of your yes, no matter how big or small or messy it may seem. At the end of each chapter under the heading "Unpinned Faith" I've included some reflections and personal challenges for you. Why "unpinned faith"? I spent my first thirty-seven years wearing my sparkly, pinned-on faith and trying to fit Jesus into my life. It wasn't until I started *fitting my life into Jesus* that my faith became enough. Saying yes to Him has led me on an unbelievable journey.

So . . .

*if you have a dream*

*if you have stopped dreaming*

*if you need more time*

*if you have too much time*

*if you want to slow down life*

*if you want to speed it up for better days*

*if you long for a family dinner together*

*if you long for a moment to yourself*

*if you want your kids to recognize the needs of others*

*if you believe God has a purpose for your life*

*if you want your life to count*

*if you want what you do to matter*

*. . . this book is for you.*

*Kristen Welch*

JANUARY 2014



## PROLOGUE

ARMED GUARDS WALKED ME, a group of other bloggers, and our guides down a muddy trail into Mathare Valley, one of Kenya's largest slums and most dangerous areas. We were observing and writing on behalf of Compassion International, who had arranged the trip.

I trembled from more than fear. There was hopelessness everywhere I looked—endless tiny tin shanties where hundreds of thousands of people were crowded, “homes” with no electricity or running water. Plastic bags full of sewage floated in a green stream, and the ground wasn't made of dirt at all—it was just a mountain of trampled garbage. The stench nearly gagged me.

A majority of the residents were small, unsupervised children. They called out to us, “How-ah-you? How-ah-you?” hoping we would put something into their upturned hands. We could see by their swollen bellies that they were malnourished. Their faces were filthy and covered with flies, which they didn't bother to shoo away.

It was a hellhole, not fit for the living.



I began to cry and couldn't stop. I wanted to shut it all out. I was angry with God. *Where are You? How can You allow so much suffering?*

Then I stopped and closed my eyes. I saw God's finger pointed at me as He asked my spirit the same question: "*Kristen, how can you allow this?*"

In that exact moment, I knew my life would never be the same.

I was a long way from home and my family. I was "just a mom." But my faith journey that started in high school had brought me to this point. Standing in this wretched place, I realized only He knew where it was going to lead.

# RHINESTONE JESUS



*People are like stained-glass windows. They sparkle and shine when the sun is out, but when the darkness sets in, their true beauty is revealed only if there is a light from within.*

ELISABETH KÜBLER-ROSS

IT WAS MY FIRST DAY of tenth grade at Deer Park High School in Deer Park, Texas, and I sat in Algebra 2, the class right before lunch. But I wasn't thinking about equations. I was trying to figure out where I would sit in the cafeteria during lunch, a heavy question for most socially awkward introverts. I looked around the classroom. *I don't recognize anyone here!* My mind wandered back to my imminent dilemma. I could picture myself, tray in hand, searching the mass of students, looking for an empty spot. It was one of my recurring nightmares.

Just then I looked up and made eye contact with the girl sitting across from me in class. She smiled. It took more courage than I care to admit to whisper, "Where are you sitting at lunch?" I was glad to see a look of relief cross her face, and we made plans to sit together.

Meagan and I were an unlikely pair, but from that day on we shared a lunch table with a few other girls, all of us looking for a place to belong. I liked her, but I quickly learned we were very different.

I was an introverted good girl with a passion for thrift shopping, boys, and Jesus, not necessarily in that order. I lived in a Christian home, and church was a huge part of my life. I was *that* good girl: the one who carried her Bible to school and wore a rhinestone lapel pin that spelled out in sparkly letters J-E-S-U-S. (It was the late eighties, so it's not nearly as horrid as it sounds.)

It wasn't easy for me to talk about my faith; it was easier to let Rhinestone Jesus do the talking for me. Sure, there were days I wanted to fit in and be like everyone else, but I forced myself to pin it on because my desire to be known as a Christian kept me on the straight and narrow.

Between the Jesus pin, my Bible in my backpack, and my good-girl choices, I pretty much alienated myself from the popular kids. I was a different kind of nerd than the classic geek with taped glasses and a pocket protector, but I was a misfit nonetheless.

Still, in most ways I was a typical teen: I loved Friday night football games; hanging out with my twin sister, Kara, and friends at youth group events; and shopping. But my desire to act like a Christian made me completely atypical. It was uncommon for kids in my school to tuck their Bibles in their backpacks, lead the school Bible club, turn down dates with boys whom their parents didn't know, and have a closet full of T-shirts with Christian slogans or verses. I never missed youth group on Wednesday nights, and I always looked for opportunities to invite a friend to go with me.

After a couple of lunches, I learned Meagan was on the drill team and loved dancing, and although she wasn't quite as shy as I was, we had similar personalities. There was one big difference between us, though. She had quite the potty mouth.

A lot of kids in my school cussed, but I usually just ignored it. Still, I knew if Meagan and I were going to be true friends, I was going to have to speak up about it sooner or later. That day came pretty quickly. My cuss quota was at an all-time high, so I made one small decision that would ultimately alter my life in an unbelievable way. I rudely stopped Meagan midsentence and said in a rush, "I really want to be your friend, but do you think you could try not to cuss so much around me?"

Y'all, that was so hard to say!

"Why?" Meagan's question wasn't asked sarcastically or in a mean way. I took a deep breath and thought, *Because good girls don't cuss*. But what came out of my mouth was something uncharacteristically bold. "Because I'm a Christian and it makes me uncomfortable."

Meagan shrugged and said something like, "Okay. I'll try. I've never been to church."

From that moment, she made a conscious effort to clean up her language. But even better, Meagan started going to church with me. Before long, we were inseparable. I'll never forget the day, a couple of months later, when I led her to Christ on the right side of the sanctuary where the youth in our church sat. It was a Sunday night and she seemed fidgety and nervous, and so I came out with it: "Do you want to ask Jesus into your heart?" I remember hoping I was doing it right. I prayed a prayer and she repeated it. It was surreal, and it changed my life. All of the Sunday school classes and church services I'd attended since

birth couldn't compare with the amazing experience of praying with someone to receive Jesus in her life for the first time.

Meagan became a student of the Bible. She kept me on my toes. She would call and ask me question after question: "What will heaven be like?" "Is hell real?" It was work to stay one step ahead of her. One day she called and said excitedly, "I've been reading the book of Job [she pronounced it like the synonym for *employment*], and that guy was amazing!" I distinctly remember I hadn't even opened my Bible that day. She was teaching me with her hunger for God. It didn't take long for me to realize that having a new believer follow in your footsteps was challenging, like nothing I had ever experienced before. It put to the test all the knowledge I'd received and stored in my head, and demanded action.



Somewhere between leading Meagan to Christ and witnessing her getting baptized in front of our church with her family attending, something deep and profound happened in my heart. I got it. Christianity wasn't about all the things I did for Jesus; it was about coming to know Him better and making disciples. Being a believer in Christ wasn't just an identity; it was a relationship.

I decided I wanted to change the world. I dreamed of lighting it on fire, doing something big and leaving my unique mark. I wasn't alone; there was a small group of us—my sister, Meagan, and a few others who also attended our church or school Bible club. Over the next two years, Meagan's faith continued to grow, and so did our friendship. (A few years later she came to my wedding, and ten years after high school we spent

hours catching up at our class reunion. Today we are friends on Facebook and follow each other's lives closely.)

By my last year of high school, I was pegged as a hopelessly Christian girl. I lived by a long list of things I didn't do (cuss, drink, attend parties, have sex). But I also tried to be different from the world and the rest of my peers; I was the person many friends would turn to when they needed prayer. I still wore my pin most days. My theater arts program gave out silly "Napkin Awards" every year (awards printed on napkins). I received the "Rhinestone Jesus" award my senior year; it got a big laugh from the crowd, which stung a little. But for the most part, I was proud of my reputation.

Oh, and dates were rare. I can't blame the guys, really. I must have terrified them. I had my fair share of crushes on church boys and went out occasionally. Once I dated a darling boy from high school for three weeks. Luke was wildly popular and a terrible flirt. He invited me to the school Valentine's dance, so I invited him to church (missionary dating at its best). He came with me a few times (I can still remember his confusion as a Catholic boy visiting a Pentecostal church.) At the Valentine's dance, we danced one or two slow dances and ended up back at his empty house afterward. I'm still not sure if that was his plan, but I broke up with him a couple of days later, even though I liked him a lot. He was a nice boy who respected me, but I decided I wasn't the type to play with fire.

I was happy with who I was. I helped edit the school newspaper and discovered a deep love for writing. I owned an Apple Mac Classic, so clearly I was cool before my time. Writing quenched a natural hunger to express myself. I loved graphic design and using my new skills on the newspaper. I had an idea

to create a T-shirt that featured a picture of the world turned upside down. The shirt would read, “I want to turn the world upside down for Jesus.” I never made the shirt, but in my heart, it’s exactly what I set out to do.

I would be lying if I didn’t acknowledge that choosing this path made high school even harder than it already was. Exhausting. I was just a normal girl, and a part of me longed to fit in and be included. But in the end, I survived.

Meagan was the only person I led to Christ during high school. One girl. But I had put my faith into action and lived it out loud.



When I was a junior thinking about college, my parents suggested two choices: San Jacinto College, which was a local community college, or Southwestern University in Waxahachie, Texas, a small private Bible college a few hours away. I applied to the Bible college, jumping at the chance for some freedom, which is funny, considering their strict 11 p.m. curfew and the demerits doled out for being closer than six inches to a boy. But I wanted to be in my element—a place where Rhinestone Jesus was expected to sparkle.

I loved attending a small Bible college. It was exactly what I had hoped it would be. But I was anxious to finish. So I attacked my studies like I did everything else: I overloaded my schedule with semester hours so I could finish my bachelor’s degree in Christian education and my minor in English in three years and get on to world changing. I think that’s called crazy.

On the second day of Bible college, I met a very interesting young man. I quickly noticed his tan, muscular legs on our

intramural volleyball team and fell for his contagious personality. He was also one of the nicest people I'd ever met. Terrell was going to be a pastor, and that fit right into my plan. We ended up hanging out with the same circle of friends, playing cards and volleyball together. The college had a TWIRP (The Woman Is Required to Pay) Week, and I recycled an old deck of cards into an invitation and TWIRPed Terrell a few weeks after meeting him. I took him to a rowdy western restaurant, and he taught me how to two-step. Even though there were definitely sparks, he was a couple of years older than me and the timing felt wrong. A former girlfriend of Terrell's, who lived down the hall from me, started college the same week, and he realized he still had some unfinished feelings for her.

They started dating again, and she and I became dear friends, and Terrell and I began an amazing journey to becoming best friends. I dated one of Terrell's buddies, which turned out to be a painful on-and-off relationship. I would cry on Terrell's shoulder and he would share the disappointments of his relationship. After two years, we both ended up with broken hearts.

It took us four years to realize we were in love—and then suddenly, we were. (That's what happens when best friends kiss.) Terrell was in graduate school hours away from me, but our friendship grew only stronger over the years and miles. I graduated from college and my parents offered me a plane ticket to go on a trip. As I was telling Terrell over the phone one night about the gift, he invited me to come visit him at his parents' home, where he was working over the summer. That first night together, he kissed me on his parents' back porch, and I can still remember the fireworks. We got married ninety-eight days after that passionate first kiss.



So there we were—newlyweds, fresh-out-of-Bible-college newbies ready to start our lives together at a forty-year-old, troubled church in a small town in Arkansas. He was going to be the youth pastor and I the children’s pastor. We moved hundreds of miles from anyone we knew and right into the parsonage next to the church. We were armed and ready with plenty of Bible knowledge to turn the world upside down—or at least a town of twenty thousand.



Terrell’s and my wedding day

And then life happened, and things didn’t go as planned. Instead, the world slowly started sucking the dream right out of us. In the first few months of work, we learned the hard part of ministry was a lot like being pelted with popcorn. If someone throws a piece at you, it’s irritating but basically harmless. But when they keep doing it until you’re covered in popcorn, it can be hurtful and suffocating.

One Friday night, we fell into bed after a late-night youth event. The next thing we knew, someone was banging on our front door in the wee hours of Saturday morning, before the sun was up. In his haste, Terrell grabbed the first thing he found, pulled it on, and stumbled to the front door. There was a church member with his enormous RV parked in our driveway, demanding we open the church so he could fill up his ice chests with free ice from the church. My husband obliged, not realizing he was wearing my lace shirt.

Popcorn avalanche.

During our first year of marriage as youth and children’s pastors, we discovered all the things we didn’t learn in Bible college. Oh, you know—things like the fact that we would be poor and would need to work extra jobs like cleaning the church to pay our bills; and that people are mean, even Christians. I wasn’t prepared for ministry to throw us into a glass house where everyone could see in and offer opinions on every area of our lives, from what I wore on Sundays and Mondays to having a pet in the parsonage. Our first job was a battlefield between a controlling board of elders and a heartbroken pastor, and as the new youth staffers, we were constantly caught in the middle.

We received a quick education in conflict, confrontation, and control. There were situations that left knots in our stomachs and ulcers in our mouths. We loved the kids we taught each week (and remain in touch with many of them to this day), and yet it was a very stressful, difficult beginning to our life together. We had some good days mixed in with the bad, but our first experience at “world changing” left us more broken than we could have dreamed. After two long-short years, we moved across the country to New Mexico to do it all over again in another church.

This time around, we expected the worst. I think that’s just how we are as humans. We have high expectations about something or someone, and when we are disappointed, we adjust. In an attempt to protect ourselves, we put a guard around our hearts, and without realizing it, we began hardening them.



In New Mexico we met people who would become lifelong friends, which turned out to be providential. Just as Terrell and I were discovering some fulfillment in ministry, we discovered

the heartache of infertility in the midst of a church baby boom. I entered a dark season of depression.

Once our struggle got out (glass house, remember?), we were bombarded with advice from baby-makers. Everything was offered with good intentions as a way to support and encourage us; instead we felt embarrassed and isolated. I might have tried a couple of suggestions, but I drew the line at coffee enemas and standing on my head. I sank deeper into an emotional pit with every passing month.

It didn't take long for us to exhaust our financial resources. As church staff members, we didn't have infertility insurance coverage. We paid a couple of out-of-pocket expenses with the help of some family members, but when those options failed, we turned to adoption. I'd love to say we pursued adoption because of our desire to help a child in need, but in my fog of despair, I only saw my own need. Terrell and I endured a home study, completed mounds of paperwork, and answered hard questions on open adoption and teen birth mothers. Then we learned a girl we loved in our youth group was pregnant. She was keeping her baby.

This was a hard blow for me and nearly sent me over the edge. By that time, we'd been married five years. I ranted and raved and questioned God. *Why is life so difficult? I've been a good girl, a giving servant, a wannabe world-changer.* When life doesn't go according to our plans, we often turn on the divine Planner. In my pain, I couldn't see His hand. In my desperation, I didn't even know where to look for it.

I got to the place where I couldn't hold a friend's baby, and I would send gifts to baby showers rather than attend. I would hide in my church office during baby dedications and sob my way through Mother's Day. These were hard days for Terrell,

too. While he felt the blow of each passing month, he mostly struggled to encourage me. He felt powerless. But in my pain, God was present. I didn't have answers, but I did have a friend who was experiencing the same pain of infertility. God used Robin to remind me I wasn't alone.

We finally got a call from an interested birth mother, and to make a long story short, she wanted her baby to go to a childless couple and asked if I would take a pregnancy test. Of course—no problem! I had peed on more sticks than I could count in my quest for a baby, so I knew the drill.

And that's when I discovered I was pregnant with our first child. I simply couldn't believe that after so many years of struggle, we were pregnant when we least expected it. I sent my husband to the store to buy more pregnancy tests, and we tried to absorb the amazing news. We were both shocked. I was terrified I would have a miscarriage, but with every passing day, the tiny baby in me grew and so did my peace.

At one point, after I'd endured a queasy morning and tossed my breakfast in the master bathroom, I whined to my husband about my constant nausea. Terrell started laughing. "Yes! This is exactly what we wanted. This is pregnancy!"

I sort of wanted to punch him at that moment. But I had to laugh too. He was exactly right.

Terrell and I rejoiced in new life while we mourned an adoption that wasn't to be. It was a roller-coaster season of fear and relief, but it was also an exciting new chapter. I was beginning to realize that hardships in life shape us, struggles define us, and both ultimately prepare us for the future God is calling us to.

My dream to change the world hadn't disappeared, but it had definitely been tarnished—a lot like the old rhinestone pin

that occupied a corner of my jewelry box. God was trying to teach me to put my trust in Him.

I turned out to be a stubborn student.



## UNPINNED FAITH

You may not be as stubborn as I am, but I think most of us view roadblocks in our path of life as setbacks. These obstacles alter our journeys and often leave us discouraged. But God provides detours if we pay attention. When we choose to see His alternate route as an opportunity for something new rather than a dead end, it shifts our perspective.

With that in mind, take a few moments to reflect right now. Think back to your younger days. Did you have childhood dreams? Even in our childhood wishes, we can often discover what our hearts were like before they were hardened by the harsh reality of life. What events in your life have quieted or completely quenched your dreams? Did reality turn your dare into despair? When I'm feeling this way, I like to encourage myself that my life isn't over and God has a plan. In Philippians 1:6, the apostle Paul says, "Being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus."

I hope that if you've maneuvered through God's detour, you can look back and see how that difficulty has changed you for the better. And don't stop dreaming.

Are there dreams you still long to pursue? Write them down. And don't give up.

