

“Who, Me?”
Overcoming the Fear of Inadequacy

By Grace Fox

Several months after our family had begun attending a particular church, the pastor’s wife approached me. “Grace, would you like to join the pianist rotation for our worship team?” she asked. My heart nearly stopped. How did she know? As much as I’d yearned for an invitation, I’d not told anyone that I could play this instrument. After all, we’d just returned from living in Nepal for three years, and I’d had no access to a piano during that time. I’d convinced myself that my musical skills had grown too rusty to contribute anything of value.

“Thank you,” I stammered. “I...uh...I’ll think about it and let you know.” That’s when I noticed my husband’s guilty expression. “Why did you tell her?” I demanded on the ride home.

“Because it’s time to get involved,” he said. “Face your fear and say yes. You’ll enjoy yourself, and you’ll be a good addition to the team.”

Face your fear. The words stuck like glue until I admitted they were true. I *was* afraid – afraid of making mistake while playing in public and that others might think less of me if they deemed me incapable. The fear of inadequacy held me in its grip.

A Common Issue

The fear of inadequacy is common to women of all ages and from all walks of life. Before writing the book *Moving From Fear to Freedom: A Woman’s Guide to Peace in Every Situation*, I conducted a survey of approximately 350 women aged 19 to 80. Their answers included the following:

- I’m afraid I’m not fulfilling my role adequately as a wife.
- I’m afraid I’m not a good enough mother. Will my kids turn out normal?
- I’m afraid of practicing hospitality because others will see how disorganized I really am.
- I’m afraid to pray aloud in a group. My words might not sound spiritual enough.
- I’m afraid of teaching a Bible study; I’m not a good communicator.

Trapped by fear’s grip, women often fail to recognize our God-given potential. We navigate life with secret dreams hidden in our hearts but hesitate to pursue them because the fear of inadequacy holds us captive. Where does this fear find its roots?

Author Sharon Jaynes suggests that it begins from the time we’re born. From early in life some of us receive negative messages about ourselves from parents, friends, teachers, and other significant people. These messages, given both intentionally and unintentionally, are subconsciously programmed into our brains like words into a computer and form a filter through which all information we receive passes. “Either we felt esteemed, encouraged, and embraced as a child, or we felt unloved, discouraged, and devalued,” writes Jaynes.

A false filter distorts the truth, leaving us with a negative self-perception that stays with us when we exit childhood. All too often we enter adulthood believing the lie that says we’re unloved, incapable, and inadequate. So what’s a woman to do?

The Remedy

Overcoming the fear of inadequacy requires a change in our thinking patterns. For instance, many women fall into the comparison trap. We wish we could sing like a skilled soprano, ooze with creativity like Martha Stewart, or raise kids as well-behaved as the ideal offspring that live next door.

Author John Ortberg says we must ruthlessly avoid comparing ourselves with others. “Comparison will lead to pride and a false sense of superiority if I’m ahead of someone, and misery if I’m behind,” he writes. “Or worse, I will discount and bury the irreplaceable treasure that the Lord of the Gift has given to me alone.”

To avoid the comparison trap, we need to identify, develop, use, and value our unique abilities. And we need to cheer other women along as they use theirs. One writer confessed to me that she made it a spiritual discipline to congratulate other writers on their successes, even when she felt insecure with her own accomplishments in comparison. This small thing helped her move past feeling diminished as others grew in their career. And a funny thing happened on the way...she grew to really mean what she said. She was able to feel truly happy for others. After all, a potpourri of personalities and gifts is necessary for God’s kingdom to function and grow as it ought.

The fear of making mistakes is another thought pattern that needs revamping. Someone once said that the greatest mistake we can make is constantly fearing we will make one. Why is that a struggle? Because we don’t want others to think we’re idiots.

Did you know that chocolate chip cookies were someone’s mistake? After mixing dough, Ruth Wakefield, owner of the Toll House Inn, realized she was out of baker’s chocolate. Instead, she added chunks of a chocolate bar, expecting them to melt in the oven. They didn’t. Wakefield teamed up with her friend Andrew Nestle and let him print the recipe for Toll House cookies on their packaging. Part of their agreement was that Ruth received all the chocolate she could use the rest of her life. What a great mistake!

Ruth could have trashed the cookies, afraid that someone might regard her baking skills as inadequate. Instead, she shared the mistake with her friends. Decades later we enjoy the most popular cookie ever invented.

Life involves risk, and mistakes happen. They neither spell the end of the world nor decrease our worth in God’s eyes, and usually not in anyone else’s eyes either.

Sometimes, when presented with new opportunities, we think *I can’t do that. I’m not good enough*. Assuming the new opportunities are heaven-sent, God will equip us. Each time the lie pops up, we can counter it with the truth: “Thank You, God, for promising that I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me” (Philippians 4:13).

Changing faulty thought patterns helps overcome the fear of inadequacy. But there’s one more thing we can do: actually admit our inadequacies. It’s okay to admit to others that we can’t do everything like a pro. It’s okay to admit that we’re imperfect or struggling with fear. Being honest about ourselves allows others the freedom to be honest, too. This opens the door for mutual encouragement and prayer support.

What new opportunities lay before you? What secret dreams lay hidden in your heart? Don’t let the fear of inadequacy hinder you from seeing those dreams fulfilled. Take courage, move forward, and watch as fear takes flight.

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