

Authentic Parenting in a Postmodern Culture

Mary E. DeMuth



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This book contains stories in which the author has changed some people's names and details of their situations in order to protect their privacy.

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A Caveat

The first time I heard about postmodernity, I was a young mother, deep in the throes of diapers, toddler tantrums and primordial exhaustion. I brushed the notion aside, thinking it unimportant—completely unrelated to my life as a mother. The next time I heard about it was in the context of evil. Radio voices warned about the slippery slope of postmodern thinking and the inherent wrongness of a postmodern worldview. Again, this seemed detached from my very real life as a preschool parent, the day-to-day joy and grind of raising the next generation (while I cleaned peanut butter from every surface). Although I largely ignored the alarming statements, a bit of the fear infused itself into my heart. Not knowing really what postmodernism was, I envisioned it as a malevolent force, like the New Age scare of the '80s.

The next time I heard about postmodernity, my children were all three walking and talking and making their own peanut butter and jelly sandwiches—no more diapers, still some tantrums. Patrick (my husband) and I were exploring church planting in Western Europe, and the terms *postmodern* and *emergent* kept circulating around us.

A Shift

Something had shifted in that interim period between ignoring and fearing postmodernity. I started thinking emergent

thoughts! I became dissatisfied with parts of my Christian culture, but I couldn't enunciate my unease. Although I could not define my past inner world as *modern*, nor could I dare call my new thoughts *postmodern* for fear of being seen as evil, I knew my thinking had shifted radically. As our church-planting organization educated us about the cultural shift to postmodernism, Patrick and I nodded a lot. We resonated with what we heard. Eventually, we moved our family thousands of miles away to the hotbed of postmodernity—Western Europe.

Now that my eldest child is kissing adulthood, I am vitally interested in how postmodernity and parenting intersect. I worry that I am not preparing my children for the emergent culture teeming around them. With a jumble of modern and postmodern worldviews twisting in my head, how do I discern what is truth? How do I navigate this new world, where such a profound cultural reversal is dawning? How do I parent when the Christian parenting bookshelf tells me one thing but my instincts tell me another? What is a biblical, timeless view of parenting? What should I embrace from modernity? What should I discard? What of postmodernity is compelling to parents and children? What should make me shudder?

I say all this to reassure you. Like you, I am a learner. I don't have a keen grasp on postmodernity. If you read a lot of recent postmodern Christian thinkers, you'll hear the same words echoed. We don't really know what postmodernism is, so much as what it isn't. We don't fully understand the shift from one worldview to another, just as we might not understand tremors underfoot before an earthquake. In retrospect, we'll all know more, understand more. Right now, our feet are standing on shifting ground. The ground is not the same as it was before the shift, nor will it remain the same after it is finished shifting. One thing we can be assured of is that we are in the midst of change.

How Does That Relate to Parenting?

In some ways it is completely unrelated. God still calls on us to love our children with sacrificial love. We must be models of grace. We still are responsible to train our children. Postmodernity does not release us from establishing good, spiritual foundations in our home. But on another plane, postmodernity radically affects the manner in which we parent. To prepare and engage our children in their postmodern world, we must embrace dialogue, community, the world. We must reorient ourselves beyond the four walls of our insulated homes. We must see our parenting as a kindred journey with our children, a coming alongside.

In that journey, I am a newcomer. With you, I am learning. As I stand on the fault line of cultural shift, I will make many, many mistakes. So that's my caveat. I'm writing this book for your sake as well as mine—to learn the value of exegeting both culture and the Bible, and to do it with a heart of humility. I want to come alongside you, reassuring you that we can parent authentically in this emergent culture.

I wrote this book while our family was living amid postmodernity in the south of France. My children attended schools where relativism, pessimism and atheism reigned, and Christianity had little or no impact on the overall culture. Even so, they shared the story of Jesus with their friends and the children who teased them. This book is not so much my wisdom, but the culmination of their difficult experiences and our coping strategies as a family. We struggled to define and understand the culture, and as church planters, we tried to reach it with the gospel; in that context, I wrote this book.

You won't find the ten steps to perfect parenting within these pages. Nor will you find a rambling, nonsensical approach to postmodern parenting. I hope what I offer here is life—the life of Jesus infused into our imperfect home in this shifting, imperfect world.

Part One:

Foundations

What exactly is postmodernism? And how does it affect our parenting? In this section, I'll discuss what it is and how it relates to everyday life. In a sense, I'll be exegeting this emerging shift, sifting out the dross of both modernity and postmodernity and mining the gems of both.

One

A Story

“Don’t forget this.” Jacob’s mother shoved a tiny packet at his midsection, coarsely wrapped in brown paper. “You’ll want to have hollyhocks in your new home—to attract a wife.”

Jacob took the seeds. He smiled. “I’ll need more than seeds, Mama, to attract a woman to the likes of *this*.” He rubbed his stubbled face and looked at his parents. His entire life they seemed tall, looming even. Like the epic hemlocks guarding their claim, his parents sheltered him from relentless Pacific Northwest downpours. Today, though, he was unsettled to see how short Mama and Papa had become, how frail.

His father muffled words from the back of the cabin—marching orders. Whenever Papa mumbled, Jacob knew enough to hunker down and listen. The two shared a quiet camaraderie, so much so that Jacob knew to bring kindling to the stove where Papa stood. Without words, the once-mumbling man took each thin stick, broke it, and tossed it into the stove.

“Best be remembering everything we taught you,” his father said.

“I’ve spent my life listening to you, Papa. You know that. I know how to milk a cow even when she’s cross, how to survive in the woods for weeks at a time, how to plant corn and beans together like the Indians. I can skin a rabbit, start a fire from flint, and write a fine letter.” Jacob wanted to thank his father then, but the words were held hostage on the tip of his tongue.

There were things you didn't say to Papa, especially when he was sparking a fire in the stove.

Mama came behind Jacob now, stroking his shoulder. "Mind how you've been raised, Jacob-boy. You remember." She padded to the willow-tree rocking chair Papa had fashioned her when they were courting. She sat down. Her lips pursed as if they were ready to unleash a string of instructions. Instead, she took in a deep, autumn breath and rocked. Back and forth. Back and forth.

It was her way, Jacob knew. Mama's voice was more powerful when no words were uttered. In the silence, Jacob remembered the sentences Mama would have said. Should have said. *Work the farm when it is light; when it's dark, mend the tack. Remember the ant; store up your food for winter down in the cellar. Sleep the sleep of hard labor. When worry threatens, lift a prayer to the Almighty. Pioneering means taking risks. The dictionary spells good with two Os; the Bible spells it with one. All of life began in a garden; best keep cultivating. Feed the land when it's starving, let it lie fallow when it languishes, weed it when it's gangly.* All the words swirled through Jacob's heart, simultaneously stinging and blessing him. Growing up, becoming a man, was a beautiful and painful endeavor. Why did moving on mean leaving the two people who mattered most?

Surrounded by tendrils of nose-stinging wood smoke, Jacob coughed. He adjusted the satchel on his back, feeling its weight. His new life consisted of the leather bag's bulging contents: a knife, a bedroll, a gun, gunpowder, seeds from Mama's garden, a little money, hard tack for the journey, Papa's Bible, a *Farmer's Almanac*, woolen socks knitted days before and all the hopes and aspirations of his parents. The hope—now etched on their lined faces—weighted him the most. All that hope poured into his life.

For this day.

He nodded to them both. He stood there many moments as

the fire crackled to life, each hot sputter ticking away another agonizing moment. *Today's the day I leave them.* The words cadenced themselves in his head like a distant, constant drumbeat. Although distrustful of technology, Jacob suddenly wanted one of those picture boxes—to capture once and for all this moment, these faces that dared to ingrain their lives into his. But without a camera, Jacob had to click a picture of Mama and Papa in his mind, to imprint it permanently on the slate of his thoughts.

“Thanks,” was all he said. One word. It seemed such a paltry word, so stripped of emotion, but it was all he had. If he let more words escape his dry mouth, he'd likely choke on his weeping. With that, he turned from them and opened the door, leaving his childhood in the embers of Papa's stove.

As soon as the heavy door thudded behind him, a strange odor assaulted his nostrils. Smoke. He lifted his eyes to see its hazy source—a screaming metal oxcart whirring by. In place of the treed world he grew to love was chaos, noise, clamor. The sun hinted at itself as glint on tall mirrored towers that seemed to hold the sky up. At Jacob's feet where mud should have clung to his soles was some sort of solid rock, strewn with bits of colored paper. People buzzed at him from all corners, from all places, pressing into him, looking at him with bewildered detachment.

It was his look as well. Bewildered. Detached. *Where am I?*

Jacob stomped his boots on the hard ground, hoping it would reorient him. No luck. Satchel still on his back, he stared down a central path teeming with men and women and children. Seeing a tall, metal hitching post, he willed himself to walk. As he approached what he now realized was a lamppost, he could feel the hardness of the trail jar his feet and knees. The screaming, smoke-emitting wagons passed by him, more insistent, louder than locomotives. He held the lamppost while the world screeched around him in a maniacal hurry. People, machines, tower-of-Babel buildings—all stung his eyes.

Jacob turned back, hoping he'd see the little cabin in the

woods, chimney smoke kissing the clean sky, but it was gone. His parents and their gentle garden-loving ways were gone. Their voices grew quieter and quieter amid the cacophony until he could barely remember the tremor in his mother's song or the baritone richness of his father's lecture. He remembered his satchel then as he clung like a six-year-old to the lamppost.

Useless.

When he walked down the peopled street into the great, wild unknown, Jacob had no tools to navigate the world. He dropped his satchel and faced the confusing world lost and alone.