



Mary with grandson, Josh

Willing to Take the Risk — Making a Difference: Mary Manz Simon

By Beth Foreman, Features Editor

She's an expert on Mousers, Rewinders, Playpen Sports, and Luxe Kids. Her name appears on the cover of more than two million books published since 1987 starting with *Little Visits with Jesus* (CPH) and including the recent *Trend-Savvy Parenting* and a personal favorite, *My Easter Basket, and the True Story of Easter*. She was the Bible study leader at the 2007 LWML national convention. She's active with the *Ablaze!* movement and thousands hear parenting advice on her daily radio program that is broadcast on more than 200 stations across the country.

But Dr. Mary Manz Simon is *real* — a mom, a grandma, a wife, a child of God — and *really* busy guiding other moms and grandmas as they navigate the sometimes troubling waters of the twenty-first century — the Information Age, as Mary calls it.

"Time is the currency of the twenty-first century," she said on the phone from her home on the East Coast. "What are we doing with the time that God

Mousers: Infants and toddlers who use lapware (software for pre-readers).

Rewinders: Grandparents who provide primary childcare for their grandchildren.

Playpen Sports: The umbrella term for organized sports targeted to toddlers and preschoolers.

Luxe Kids: The result of parents who "trade up" for their children.

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gives us? Are we spending it in ways that really would praise God? It's a challenge."

Taking some of that precious time from her busy schedule — she stepped off an airplane more than 64 times last year! — Mary shared some of her life's joys and challenges.

This Quarterly issue offers reflections on risk-taking and making a difference. Are you a risk-taker?

Because of my personality — driven and easily bored! — I've taken lots of risks, but only within the framework of trying to stay within God's plan for my life. Making a difference: *sometimes* that involves risk-taking.

What about some of the risks you've taken?

Honestly, the biggest risk I ever took was marrying my husband, Hank, over 33 years ago! I grew up in a parsonage, and I had always said I would *never* marry a pastor. It was the best risk I ever took!

And then two years ago, we took a big risk when my husband accepted a call and we moved halfway across the country. Talk about taking risks! My husband was a pastor in Belleville [Illinois] for thirty years. And to move half way across the country after serving a parish for 30 years! It was a wonderful congregation and a lovely place to raise our children. And we have a wonderful congregation here. This is where we belong now.

What has been challenging about your move out East?

It was a real sticker shock! We live in a condo, and [to afford living here] we have no cable, no cell phones, and we share a car.

And it works. God has given us the most incredible location. I'm not home all that often, but when I'm home, I can walk to the grocery store and the gym — and then I'm good. The thing that's hardest with the East Coast living is the time changes — when I have the West Coast speaking trips. Those are tough and then I feel my age!

Traveling through time zones is a challenge at any age!

Yes, but when you know you are where God wants you, it's so affirming. I feel so blessed.

"Where God wants you..." Is that always so clear?

We have a God of surprises! Isn't that fun! We never know when we're going to have opportunities. That's why we always have to stay in touch with God. You never know when He's going to put His hand on your shoulder and say, turn around. There's an opportunity!

Tell us about some of those surprises in your life.

I look at my life and think, wow! Look at what God has done! I *never* planned



to write a book. My doctoral dissertation was enough. When I was a little girl, I remember the night that my dad got his doctorate. It was at the University of Chicago at that beautiful chapel. I remember feeling the velvet on his robe; he had velvet stripes. I'm not saying that propelled me, but it was certainly something I grew up remembering.

And so you wrote your dissertation, received your degree, and then you started a family?

I got my degree in 1980 *while* I was having babies. Each stage of the doctoral process — it was a five-year haul — we had another child. After I finished my course work, we had Christy. Then after my “writtens”, we had Angie. And we had Matthew after I finished my degree. Today, they are grown with families of their own.

So how did you start writing your first book, Little Visits with Jesus?

When I really felt initially that I was supposed to write a book, I told God I was too busy. I remember that very clearly. It was a nagging thing. *You are supposed to write a book.* I thought, no. It's too hard. It's no fun. I just don't want to do it.

It all started when my children were very little. We had three kids in three and one-half years! My husband and I searched for a devotional book and when we couldn't find one, I started writing down everyday events to share with the

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children each evening. I'd write wherever and whenever I saw God at work in our lives. I'd write on McDonald's napkins, shopping lists, whatever I could find.

And look what God has done!

And that's why one of my favorite Bible stories is the story of Rhoda. It's probably not up there in the top ten favorite Bible stories. Rhoda was that servant girl who left Peter standing in the street. Remember when Peter got out of jail? I just love this story! Look at how God was able to take a servant girl like Rhoda who even left a saint standing in the street! And look how God was able to take me, an author who didn't even want to write a book. The parallels are so direct. I'm a great example — and Rhoda is too — of how God can take a regular ordinary person...I'm a soccer mom. I was a PTA president. I'm nobody special. But God can take us — whether it's Rhoda the servant or Mary the soccer mom — and use us! (Acts 12:1-17)

So many of us feel we can't make a difference.

Yes — Rhoda, the servant girl, just had to open the door! That story is so real. If Rhoda hadn't finally opened the door, the soldiers could have come to



reclaim Peter. Yes, we think we're so insignificant in God's big picture. But we are all called to serve in different ways. Doors for me have opened in nontraditional ways. I've been speaking to thousands of people. I have a radio show on over 200 stations every day. I do a lot of television. These are incredible doors but they aren't any *better* doors — they're different. We always have to stay open to where God is leading.

And maybe that's the risk? Not saying “No” when it might be scary!

Or uncertain. We feel we're not equipped. We don't have the confidence that God will be with us. But if He opens the door...I've seen this again and again in my life.

One of the doors opened to you was to write the “Family Faith Guide” for the movie, Charlotte's Web. What is it like to consult for people in the entertainment industry?

I've flirted on the edge of children's entertainment and it has been a blessing. I'd find myself sitting at a high-level meeting with some famous people and I'll think, *What am I doing here!*? I just feel like crawling under the table because I'm not at this level. Yet God gives me the right words to say. His presence is so real. It is just so real.

So your experience with the entertainment industry has been a joy?

Oh, yes! There are people in media today who are very concerned about the images our children are seeing — and they want to get kids into books and good entertainment. I'm not going to change Hollywood, but it has been a great privilege to build relationships that God can work through.

Still, we have to be the gatekeepers. Too often we throw up our hands and say we can't do anything. That's not true. We can do a lot. We have to filter because so much junk is out there. We live in an information age, and there's a lot of stuff floating around that isn't good. One of the biggest mistakes we make is we think we're powerless. But really, we have so much control over what enters a child's life.

In Trend-Savvy Parenting, you write, “We are poised on the edge of a societal rift... Time starved and overwhelmed, parents struggle to simultaneously juggle the daily schedule, find a healthy balance, and raise happy, loving kids.” How do we raise happy, loving kids?

As Christians, we have an anchor in this world of change: the Bible. Sadly, we sometimes think the Bible is irrelevant, and that concerns me. God's Word is so

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real! That's why our devotions started with how God is busy in our everyday lives. We did "God-sightings" in our family.

God-sightings?

Yes, we looked for ways that God was busy in the world around us. When we started looking, we saw! Wow, He really is busy!

All of us feel time-starved and overwhelmed. We can't imagine finding time to make a difference.

Unfortunately, we compartmentalize spirituality and religion to Sunday mornings. Then we end up with a jack-in-the-box Jesus, and that's wrong. We need to practice lifestyle Christianity.

Lifestyle Christianity?

Is our faith so real that people see something different? Is it how we approach things with an optimistic framework? Is it how we look at things? Is it that we have a generous spirit? Is it that we have an attitude of servanthood? Think about that mom who always takes the time to read that nighttime story, or that grandma who's always making sure that the family holds hands around the table when they pray before a meal.

I'm glad you mentioned Grandma. Many of our readers are blessed with grandchildren. How can grandparents make a difference in their family's lives today?

Today's grandparents are on their third job after retirement! We have to look for the opening in our families. We can't force

things that aren't there, but we can certainly catch those moments of potential influence where we can make a difference. Those times can come in unexpected ways: after a family dinner, when you're taking a child to a movie, when you're shopping for a toy. We should maximize the moments we have. Sometimes we think those times will always be here. Well, life is short — at least on this earth.

That's how we make a difference on a regular basis. Not only by taking risks, but just by doing the things we do every day, by doing the boring, mundane everyday kind of things.

Your life has been quite a journey! What's around the corner?

I have no idea of the plans God has for me! That's why I really like Jeremiah 29:11. As we look to the future, we know that things are going to be changing and we're going to face situations we can't even anticipate. But we can be absolutely certain that God knows exactly what we are to be doing and where we are to be going. So even if *we* don't know, it's a tremendous comfort that God has it all figured out. We should just go about doing our daily work. We're called to be faithful stewards of what He gives us.

But the future? It's in His hands.

Dr. Mary Manz Simon lives in Odenton, Maryland, and attends Galilee Lutheran Church, where her husband, Hank, is the pastor. As a parenting educator, she travels to churches across the country to address the "Seven Trends Parents and Grandparents Should Know." Her latest books are My First Read and Learn Book of Prayers (Scholastic) and Noah Builds a Boat (Random House). Visit with Mary at www.marymanzsimon.com.