

Raising Radiant Daughters In Dark Places

by Emily J. van Dalen

Part II: Telling the Truth

Radiance! Isn't that what we long to see when we look in the faces of our daughters? We want to see the celebration of heart that happens when a girl knows to the core of her being that she is "image of God." We want her to know that when God created her, He cupped her tenderly in His hands and laughed over her in delight.

As our daughters grow up in Islamic cultures, how can we proactively offset the negative input—the comments, the stares, the frequent small abuses that teach untruthful messages about women? I believe we can only do it by conscientiously seeking every possible means of reaffirming the Truth. We must effectively communicate to our daughters that they are of value, that their accomplishments are significant, that God loves them dearly.

Why is this such a difficult thing to do in practice? In the crush of ministry responsibilities, in the pressure of trying to make culturally-sensitive lifestyle choices, in the crazy, unpredictable patterns of our lives overseas, why is it so hard to take the time to see, and hear, and touch, and love our daughters? Where are we to find the resources to replenish in them what gets so terribly depleted by the negative messages they absorb? How can we reach through and fill the hearts of our daughters with good?

I wonder if part of our difficulty lies in the tension we feel between living

"incarnationally" within the culture, while at the same time resisting its ungodly Islamic view of women. To what extent are we to follow the cultural norms, and at what point should we take a stand against them? If we take a stand against them, should we do it only verbally, or should we do it by making lifestyle changes with regard to how we raise our daughters?

Somehow Jesus handled these hard issues so well. He was able to reach straight through cultural barriers and speak to women soul to soul. And he didn't just do it with words. And he didn't just do it in all the socially acceptable ways.

In a sense, the Jesus we follow into these Islamic cultures is unpredictable and upsetting. He doesn't always stick to the rules. He goes to radical lengths to become incarnate and to fully identify with those he comes to save. And then, having done that, he promptly breaks the cultural norms, sits down beside a well and engages a Samaritan woman in personal conversation. Or he allows a harlot to touch his feet with her tears. He shocks and alienates people—and then goes out searching for them, one lost sheep at a time.

What would this same Jesus do in our position in an Islamic context? How does He want His women to live there? Which cultural norms concerning women would He accept and which would He denounce? What truths

would He want us to know as we seek to raise the daughters He has given us? I believe those truths would include the following:

- 1) The Truth About Local Attitudes Towards Women & Sexuality
- 2) God's Truth Modeled in Positive Intimate Relationships
- 3) The Truth About Our Daughters' Created Identities

1) The Truth About Local Attitudes Towards Women & Sexuality

Jesus never minimized the truth about sin. He knew there were things terribly wrong with the world—and He talked about those things. I think sometimes when we enter other cultures we make the mistake of bending over backwards to “be positive.” We don’t want to appear as though we are in culture shock, or that we are being culturally insensitive. We focus so hard on the “horizontal” aspect of incarnational ministry (i.e. becoming like those we have come to serve), that we forget the “vertical” aspect of incarnational ministry (i.e. becoming more like Jesus and relating to others with uncompromising godliness). Sometimes we are so focused on blending in with the culture, we cover over or deny things we should be facing head on.

Tim and Cheryl (names have been changed), a young expatriate couple, settled in our city overseas. A couple months later Cheryl shared some of her experiences since arriving. She and her husband had taken pre-field courses on linguistics, world religions, and relating across cultures. They

thought they were well prepared, but there were some things they hadn’t anticipated. Their assumption was that in an Islamic country, a man would never stare at or touch a woman inappropriately. After all, Islam taught strong family values and the protection of women. So the first time Cheryl was pinched she was dumbfounded. She thought she’d imagined it. The next time it happened, she knew she hadn’t! She turned indignantly to Tim expecting him to defend her. But he was still stuck in his glossed-over expectations. It became a real stress in their marriage. When something happened he would tell her she was imagining things—being oversensitive, exaggerating. Once or twice he even made the mistake of joking about it. For a while their marriage went through a rough time because of his unrealistic attitude toward the culture.

One of the very first things we *must* do when we enter a new culture is to open our eyes wide and take a good look around. Acknowledge the truth. What is the reality of life here? What is the status of women? What are the local beliefs and practices related to human sexuality? I’ve already mentioned the sexual harassment of women that is common in many Islamic countries. Now look around you again. What are some of the other forms of sexual interaction? In one Islamic country a common form of teasing little boys is pulling their genitals. How can you prepare your son for this? In a number of South and East Asian countries it is an acceptable practice to masturbate infants to soothe them or help them

sleep. Is this an issue you need to discuss with the caregivers that watch your children? In some Islamic countries polygamy is still acceptable. What will you teach your children about this? In other places there are caste groupings within the social structure that engage in transvestitism. Your child may be approached by men dressed as women who are begging for money. How will you explain that to her?

Not all these things happen in every country. I give them as examples of things that do happen in various Islamic cultures. It is crucially important to learn what happens in your culture and to prepare your family for living in that context.

One of the best ways to counter the untruths your daughter experiences in relation to her sexual identity is to give her a thorough grounding in what the Bible teaches. Your daughter, even at a very young age, needs to know the wonder and joy of being created female. There are many good Christian books and materials on sex education available for all age levels. NavPress has an excellent series of four books written by Stan and Brenna Jones which are graduated according to age (from age 3 through 14). The series is called, *God's Design for Sex* (NavPress, 1995. Colorado Springs, CO). Another excellent resource is a coloring book for young children which teaches the difference between "good touching" and "bad touching." It is entitled *It's Okay to Say No!* and is published by Preschool Press, (Playmore Inc. & Waldman Pub. Corp., New York). A helpful guideline

many parents teach their kids is that any part of the body covered by a swimsuit is private and belongs only to you. It is "out of bounds" for anyone else. Tell your children what they should do if these boundaries are violated in any way. Tell them they are allowed to say "no" even to adults, to move away from the person, and to report the incident to their parents or other trusted adult caregivers.

Sexual molestation and abuse is far more common on the mission field than most of us think. Most often the perpetrators aren't strangers, but are people that are known or trusted. Significant numbers of MKs have been molested by beloved household helpers or by members of the "mission family." When the abuse is perpetrated by someone in intimate relationship with the family, it can resemble incest, and the resulting damage is even deeper.

The issue of trust is such a difficult one. Entrusting our children to someone else's care is a wonderful and necessary part of life. It would be wrong to raise our children in an environment of fear and suspicion. It would be wrong for our children to never interact deeply with adults in the community. Where we need to be careful, however, is with *implicit* trust. That is, trust which is absolute or unquestioning. There should be wisdom and discernment. There should be a sober willingness to acknowledge that abuse can and does happen in any kind of circumstance. There should be an ability to recognize the symptoms and signs of abuse, and a home environment in which a child is

heard no matter what questions or issues are raised.

The following are a few safeguards that can be built into the routines of our lives overseas that will help prevent opportunities for abuse:

- 1) Establish wise baby-sitting practices and guidelines.** Never leave children with baby-sitters unless you know them well, and even then be cautious. Call home, or check back unexpectedly during your absence to make sure everything is all right. Teach teenage babysitters not to give unnecessary information on the phone or to let the caller know that there is no adult in the home.
- 2) Be thorough in screening household helpers,** and after hiring them, re-train them thoroughly according to your values and standards of behavior.
- 3) Be involved in your child's school.** Make sure the school (especially if it is a boarding school) has thorough screening procedures for staff and that there is good oversight and accountability.
- 4) Be aware of where your children are when you go visiting.** People of all cultures love children, but they may not demonstrate it in appropriate ways. Someone may want to pick up your child and carry her off to show everyone around the neighborhood. To be suddenly grabbed and taken off by a stranger can be frightening to a child, and it is also very unwise. Try to offer an opportunity for relationship and friendship in which you can be with your child. Be willing to say "no" when it is appropriate.

5) Often men in Islamic cultures assume they can be more "familiar" and intrusive in relating to western women. Find ways to communicate to your neighbors that you are not like the foreigners they see on TV. When our family first moved into our neighborhood overseas it caused a small sensation. People were curious to see if we were like the people they saw on CNN. When we dressed in local styles and acted conservatively our neighbors treated us with respect.

6) Help your daughter learn how to identify culturally appropriate relational boundaries. This can be much more complicated than we expect. For example, in the country where I grew up, friendship was demonstrated by hand-holding with someone of the same gender. However it was considered totally inappropriate for a man to hold hands with or touch a woman other than his wife. There were differences in "personal space," in eye contact, in posture. Talk through these differences with your daughter. Help her to recognize when the neighbor's son is taking inappropriate liberties by sitting next to her on the sofa, or shaking her hand!

7) Make sure your home environment promotes communication. As your daughter grows, talk about the issues that affect her. Tell her why you have chosen to raise her in an Islamic country and explain what "incarnational ministry" means. Specify the ways in which you have chosen to identify with the local culture, and the ways in which you have chosen to be

different. Your daughter needs to understand some of the reasoning behind decisions that affect her. She may have a lot of questions and comments. Let her communicate her feelings honestly. Don't over-spiritualize difficulties or try valiantly to only focus on the positive. It will make her feel as though she isn't being heard. Affirm the truth. Yes, life can be hard here. What are the things that are the hardest for you right now? What resources might God provide for dealing with them? Involve your daughter in the process of making lifestyle decisions. Let her know you value her input.

Finally, learn how to recognize some of the signs and symptoms that accompany sexual molestation and abuse, and *never* assume it can't happen to someone in your family! This morning I received an email from a woman serving in an Islamic country. She wrote: *For me, the thought of (sexual abuse) happening to my precious little girl was so horrendous that even though I suspected it subconsciously, my conscious mind would never allow it to come to the surface. So my daughter's abuse went on for months before I finally could not ignore it any longer, and reality came crashing in. Praise God she reacted violently to the abuse with nightmares and terror, or who knows if I ever would have known. She was only two. We found out what was going on just after her third birthday... I should also mention that the abuse happened by a woman... not by a man. Can you believe it?... I know of two other daughters of co-workers here who have experienced abuse...*

Knowing some of the possible signs of abuse can lead to early intervention. Here are some of them:

- nightmares, terror of the dark or other sleep disturbances,
- unusual fear of strangers or of specific individuals known to the family,
- unusual fear of separation from parents or of being left with a babysitter,
- physical bruising or abrasions, vaginal infections or inflammation,
- loss of appetite,
- behavioral problems,
- depression or withdrawal,
- loss of interest in normal activities and involvements,
- unusual mood swings or weepiness.

If the incident of abuse is very traumatic it may be wise to get help from a qualified counselor. Some studies have shown that a person who is effectively debriefed within 24 to 72 hours after a traumatic event is less likely to experience long-term effects such as depression or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Prompt intervention can make a big difference to recovery.

If abuse does occur it needs to be dealt with immediately at two levels, first with the victim, and then with the abuser. First, the victim needs to know that it is safe to talk, that there is no topic that is off-limits, and that she will be heard lovingly and without accusation. She needs to see you act as her advocate, showing just anger in her defense against the perpetrator. Seeing your reaction of concern and anger—seeing that you view what happened as a clear wrong done against her,—is a

key ingredient to good recovery. If the incident is cloaked in secrecy and hustled out the back door, there can be real confusion for the child. She may feel that she was the one who did wrong instead of the abuser, or she may sense that she somehow deserved what happened. She may feel you are ashamed of her. Statistics indicate that sexually abused children more frequently enter abusive relationships later in life. Some of this may be related to the secrecy and mixed signals they receive at the time of the event.

Second, the perpetrator needs to be dealt with in a just and godly manner. This can be a real dilemma on the mission field. We are so geared towards being sensitive to the culture, not offending, being tactful. Sometimes we place a higher value on culturally appropriate responses than on Biblical responses. Sometimes we want to "gently correct" rather than confront someone directly with the truth and apply just consequences to wrong actions.

But think of the message to a child that has been harmed if the abuser isn't clearly confronted. One message is *adults are more important than children*. Another message is *God's program for the unsaved is more important than His care for His children*. Missionaries need to know that incarnational ministry includes Jesus' uncompromising hatred of sin, and that in clearly evil situations, there is freedom or "permission" to confront and oppose that evil—even if it goes against what is considered to be "culturally correct."

This doesn't mean there is no room for prayer, forgiveness, reconciliation, restoration—hopefully all of that will happen. But even in the instance of repentance and restoration, the perpetrator should be removed from ongoing contact with the child.

I know that much of this sounds very negative, as though life within the borders of Islam must be lived in fear and defensiveness. No, it shouldn't be lived that way. It is possible to live in an Islamic culture with confidence and joy. And it is also possible to quietly build into our lifestyles wise safeguards and guidelines that flow from a truthful assessment of our surroundings. An important ingredient in raising radiant daughters in dark places is protecting them from harm.

2) God's Truth Modeled in Positive Intimate Relationships

A friend recently shared what she thought was the single most important positive influence in raising a daughter in an Islamic context. It was a strong marriage relationship between her parents. Yes! It is here, closest to home, where a girl deeply and personally experiences the truth. Think for a moment of the negative input your daughter is receiving from Islam. What does she need to see and experience when she walks through the front door of her own home? She needs a powerful reconfirmation of Biblical truth! As she watches how her father relates to her mother, does she see him valuing her? She will notice every nuance of conversation, of courtesy, and caring. At a deep place within her, she will be

evaluating whether the truths that are spoken match those that are lived. When "spoken truth" resonates with "lived-out truth" it becomes "integrated truth." It is finally accepted as truly true! What truths are being confirmed to your daughter through your marriage?

Almost as important as the relationship between a husband and wife, is that between a father and his daughter. How he relates to her sends strong signals about her value. When he expresses his dreams for her and encourages her to excel, it gives her hope that she does, in fact, have potential. When a father makes time and expresses physical affection it says much more than just, "I love you." It says, "I enjoy you. I like spending time with you." Some of my favorite childhood memories are of times spent with my Dad—the yearly camping and fishing trips, climbing on his lap for stories, and songs and nursery rhymes.

A father is the closest male relationship a girl knows. He models God to her. If he is distant and uninvolved she begins to believe that God is that way too. She learns that she isn't worth God's time and attention. Her innate sense of value is diminished and, instead of verifying the Truth to her, the preoccupied father reconfirms the lies told by the culture.

A mother's role is vital too. She's the one who must take the initiative in helping her daughter find friends, learn cultural cues, and discover the parameters of her new world. Think carefully about the picture of woman-

hood you model to your daughter. Does it show strength, dignity, joy, gentleness of spirit? When I think of my own mother I think of someone who welled up with humor in the most disgruntling of situations. I think of open-hearted hospitality. I think of her hopes for the national girls she encouraged and educated. A daughter absorbs attitudes toward the culture largely from her mother. It is so easy in an Islamic environment for women to develop a sense of defeat and frustration and hopelessness. A little girl can hear a lot about what she *can't* do—instead of positive messages about what she *can* do. What types of ministry can your daughter be involved in? Becoming active in caring for others goes a long way in offsetting a negative and complaining spirit. A girl can learn resilience and joy and spiritual-rootedness from her mother. She can learn that radiant living isn't primarily dictated by external circumstances but by the internal condition of the heart.

There are other people in the community who can role-model truth to your daughter in intimate relationship with her. I think of the boarding staff and teachers at the school I attended for *twelve years. I think of those in particular* who were consistent "truth-tellers" as they lived out the faith they talked about. "Auntie Eva" was a twice-retired missionary in her seventies who returned to our school to help out however she could. She knew each child in the school by name and prayed for them daily on her knees. She chose a verse for each graduating senior and prayed us through the

transition to college. She was quick to laugh, to admonish, to encourage. She *liked* us kids and we knew it. She made me think that maybe Jesus liked me too. We talk often about living in community and about being the body of Christ. How committed are we to each other's children on the field? Do we ignore them or treat them as though they are invisible? Or do we encourage, nurture, and enjoy them as significant members of that body?

3) The Truth About Our Daughters' Created Identities

One of the joys of nurturing our children is witnessing the gradual unfolding of the unique design God had in mind when He created them, each one. As you raise your daughter, watch for the special ingredients God has blended together in His forming of her identity. Some of these ingredients include the shaping of her multicultural environment, the make-up of her personality and abilities, and her femininity. Your careful nurturing of these key areas of identity will go a long way in offsetting negative input. Let's look at these identity issues a little more closely:

a) *Her multicultural identity*

As a child I learned some of my most important life skills from "Ummi." She was the wife of our cook and I called her the local name for "Mommy." She taught me how to launder clothes with a bar of soap and a stick. She taught me how to build a fire and grind spices with a mortar and pestle. She taught me lullabies that still sing me to sleep. Your daughter, too, is a multicultural person. She needs your encourage-

ment to fully enjoy this aspect of her being. Sometimes as parents we can feel uneasy when our children bond deeply with the local culture. There's a twinge of regret when they prefer chicken curry and mangoes to steak and apple pie. In some ways we want our children to be just like us—to feel the same connections with our roots that we do. We want their "home" to be our "home" so that throughout life our families will always migrate back to the same place together. Your daughter needs you to take the risk of allowing her to fully enjoy her multicultural personality. It's part of God's special design for her—and the closer she comes to deeply enjoying that design, the happier she will be.

So one side of the multicultural balancing act is affirming your daughter's ties to the local culture. Help her explore some of the things local women and girls enjoy. Have fun with their styles of dress. Find out what's in fashion. Go cloth shopping and design outfits together. Paint toenails, experiment with hairstyles, wear bracelets and a nose ring! Draw some of the women and girls in the neighborhood into your learning experience. Use it as a time to make friends. Learn new recipes from your neighbors, or explore other creative outlets local women enjoy—handicrafts, painting, music, dance. Encourage deep friendships with girls who are members of the culture.

The other side of the multicultural balancing act, is the identity-links your daughter feels to your "home" (pass-

port) culture. She isn't, in fact, a member of the local culture, and she needs to be raised in a way that also affirms her "passport" cultural identity. This is especially difficult to do when you are trying to be sensitive to the Islamic values and expectations around you. You don't want to offend. But at the same time you want to allow your daughter more freedom as a woman than what local women experience. On furlough your daughter will experience a host of outlets she may never know on the field. It could be hard for her to return to the Islamic environment and suddenly feel suffocated by dress codes and lifestyle restrictions. How can you make these transitions easier for her to bear? How can you affirm some of the identity-links she feels with her parents' "home" country?

I think this is where we need to be especially sensitive in not pushing "incarnational living" farther than our daughters can bear. As a family, we used to specifically build "culture breaks" into our lifestyle. My daughter and I had a "ladies' day out" once a month. We dressed in western-style clothes and went to a fancy hotel for lunch. Another outlet was membership in the athletic facilities of the International School in our city. Within the walls of that campus our daughter could wear shorts, do Tae Kwon Do, play T-ball, swim, or take ballet lessons. Sometimes we planned a family weekend at a western-style hotel.

"Culture breaks" can also happen inside your own home. Our last home

overseas had an upstairs section with three bedrooms and a family room. Downstairs we had a guestroom, office, and living area where hospitality happened day and night. But no one was allowed upstairs except family and close friends who were invited there. I limited the times of day when our house-helper was allowed there. Our family could have our own time together to read stories, watch videos, play games. Our daughter could wear shorts, do aerobics, dance and sing. It was our private family space.

"Culture breaks" can also happen through various schooling options. I was so thankful as a girl growing up in an Islamic culture to be sent to a boarding school where, within the parameters of the school, I had the freedom to act and dress more like a westerner. There were so many activities and creative opportunities I would never have had otherwise—drama, music, art, sports and social interaction. When my husband and I returned overseas we had the opportunity to send our children to an international school where there were numerous creative outlets and extracurricular activities. I've heard of very successful home-schooling groups that meet regularly, have field trips, and organize activities that might not otherwise be possible. Think of outlets and activities to expand your daughter's horizons.

b) Her unique personality and feminine identity

I remember as a small child learning one by one the little things that made me different from every other person.

Not many of my friends nourished their hearts through the rhythms of poetry. No one else could perch in the branches of a tree, listen to the wind and think the thoughts I was thinking. Not many loved to spend time alone in the woods collecting flowers and ferns and making elf houses with bits of bark and moss. No one else made stories the way I made them.

One of the most wonderful gifts you can give your daughter is affirmation of her created identity. What are the things that are unique to her alone? What is she able to do that no one else can do quite so well? What feeds her soul? What makes her laugh and dance and sing? How can you encourage and nourish all the wonderful aspects of her being—her personal relationship with God, her intellect, her femininity, her physical body, her relational skills?

In an Islamic context it can be so easy for girls to end up with squashed and defeated personalities. Don't let it happen! Be *intentional* in the way you nurture her. This is especially important in the area of her feminine identity. Tell her why it is so special to be a woman. Give her biographies to read of strong, believing women who overcame great obstacles—Corrie ten Boom or Elisabeth Elliot, Amy Carmichael and Liliias Trotter. Encourage her to stretch her mind. Give her the life skills and experiences she needs to develop confidence and competence. Teach her how to make choices and take responsibility. Assign tasks, involve her in decision-making, ask for her opinion. As she gets older teach her

some practical life-skills, like how to budget and handle finances, how to drive, how to schedule appointments for herself, how to find a job, how to use a computer. Some of these can be hard to do in an Islamic context, and it can require some "creative" thinking and strategizing to figure out ways around "the system."

Most important, teach your daughter a Biblical view of womanhood. She needs to know deeply what it means to be "image of God." Teach her that God thinks she is of such value He died to redeem her. Introduce her to women of the Bible who played key roles in redemptive history. I've been thinking recently about Hagar, the mother of the line of Ishmael. She was an Egyptian woman, a slave-girl, a nobody. God loved her so much he pursued her far into the desert and tenderly cared for her. I've been thinking how Hagar gave him a name at that time, "You are the God who sees me" (Gen. 16:13). Maybe that's the name our daughters should carry with them as they grow up in regions where the daughters of Ishmael dwell... where there are veils and walls. They need to know that even in those stony, desert places, they are seen by God—a God who is able to make sweet waters spring up to satisfy their hearts. They need to know the joy of lifting their eyes to His face and responding with Hagar, "I have now seen the one who sees me." It reminds me of Psalm 34:5, "Those who look to him are radiant, their faces are never covered with shame." What a joy to see the reflected radiance of God in the faces of our daughters!