

“From the earliest pages I was captivated by Kelli’s journey, and then it became not only about following someone else’s story but an invitation to step into my own. I found myself needing to set the book down, to explore what was there for me, personal to me, and where God was calling me through the brave and generous honesty of Kelli’s story. This is about a rebellion not simply for the sake of challenging the status quo but for the purpose of bringing you closer to God, into truer intimacy and terrifyingly surrendered obedience.”

—**Sarah Zacharias Davis, executive director of RZIM,
and author of *The Friends We Keep***

“Reading *Unlikely Rebel* is like a personal invitation to curl up with a cup of coffee and have a heart-to-heart with God about the deepest things you feel but never say out loud!”

—**Teresa Goines, 2013 CNN Hero and founder/CEO
of Old Skool Cafe**

“I was hooked immediately by Kelli’s story and her ability to communicate clearly how devastating and powerful our false beliefs can be and how beautifully redemptive is the message of the gospel. . . . May we all become unlikely rebels who invite others to live out these truths that set hearts free.”

—**Shelley Hendrix, founder of Church 4 Chicks,
and author of *Why Can’t We Just Get Along?***

“The path of a rebel is as unique as each individual traveler. Ambush and disapproval are to be expected. Kelli Gotthardt’s memoir captures the perfect mix of pushing societal boundaries and walking in step with the Spirit.”

—**Shirin Tabor, author of *Wanting All the Right Things
and Muslims Next Door***

“I wish there were more honest stories like this being told, to reclaim the beauty of the church and what it means to follow Jesus.”

—**Dan Kimball, Vintage Faith Church, and author of
*They Like Jesus but Not the Church***

“If you’ve ever struggled with following God versus following what everyone else thinks it means to follow God, you’ll relate to Kelli Gotthardt’s story. Honest, soul-searching, and still-in-progress, Kelli shares her journey to freedom and invites us to begin our own by considering just how—and where—God is actually leading us to follow.”

—**Elisa Morgan, speaker, cohost of *Discover the Word* (discovertheword.org), and author of *The Beauty of Broken***

“A vulnerable testimony to how God can work in painful and embarrassing situations, this book can encourage us as Christ-followers to talk about these issues instead of hiding them or condemning others with them, ultimately achieving deeper healing throughout the church.”

—**Valerie Hess, author of *A Spiritual Disciplines Devotional*, and retreat speaker**

“Kelli shares beautifully, from her own experience, how she crashed into stillness and found freedom from a faith driven by ‘shoulds’ and shame. Her story and transparency invite us to consider: What motivates me? Who does God say that I am? I believe this will be a timely read for many. I know it was for me.”

—**Rachel Triske, executive director of Life in Deep Ellum**

“In an honest, kind, and winsome manner, Kelli offers her confessions. What a beautiful story. This book will set people free. If you’re tired of trying, and ready for deeper intimacy with God, then this is the book for you.”

—**Nathan Foster, author of *The Making of an Ordinary Saint***

“This is a book about freedom. Freedom from should and shame. Freedom from the box we often find ourselves trying to fit into. Kelli Gotthardt writes courageously of her quest to live in the freedom and abundant love promised to us by Jesus. I believe her story grants permission to all those on the journey to let go and return to the simplicity of the Father’s grace.”

—**Nancy Beach, leadership coach with the Slingshotgroup, and author of *Gifted to Lead***

“Most of us live our lives in the cramped, shame-filled spaces inside the walls of religious ‘shoulds’ instead of the liberating freedom of true life in God. Through her own captivating and poignant spiritual autobiography, Gotthardt not only invites us into her experience but also dares us to imagine how God might be calling us to leap into the freedom of faith too. A hilarious, heart-aching, and captivating story, the deep beauty and truth of Gotthardt’s journey reminds us all that coming to discover our own true selves, the women and men God uniquely created us to be, can seem downright rebellious.”

—**Dr. Eric Magnusson, Spring Arbor University**

“Kelli’s story is not extraordinarily unique; it’s a story with which many can relate . . . quietly. What’s extraordinary is her courage to take the risk and write about it so openly. Raw, honest, witty, she’s not only given a voice to the quiet struggles of many but also a ton of hope that there’s a way out. A compelling testimony to the truth that everything is redemptive. What a gift!”

—**Wil Hernandez, founder and president of CenterQuest**
(www.cqcenterquest.org)

KELLI GOTTHARDT

Unlikely
Rebel

A Church Girl's Journey
out of
Shoulds and Shame

 Kregel
Publications

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been omitted to protect the privacy of those individuals.

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*To Richard—
whose love has made me a better woman
than I believed I could be*

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I have dedicated this book to my husband, Richard, but that brief sentiment doesn't do justice to the journey this was for us as a couple. A number of the following chapters spurred difficult discussions that required long hours to resolve.

Richard, I'm humbled by your willingness to entrust me with telling this story in which you play a prominent role. The reader is getting snapshots of you from my point of view. I hope you share your side of this story someday soon. Through all of this, you have been my biggest fan and encourager, and I know that whatever anyone else thinks about me or my telling of this part of my journey, your love will not waver. I am safe with you.

To my children, Caleb, Cade, and Madison. Because this information is public, I shared details of my life with you that might have otherwise remained unspoken. Not as a secret, but as unnecessary for your journey. That's no longer an option, and you have responded with grace and honesty to this deeper revelation of who I am. We have erred on the side of transparency in our home, and I pray you will continue to lean into the freedom of authenticity and telling the whole truth.

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INTRODUCTION: RULE-BREAKING OBEDIENCE

My mother says I was a compliant child. As a typical firstborn, I lived to obey. More accurately, I lived to avoid the pain of disapproval. I was able to glide through my first twenty years of life squeaky clean. Sure, there were little bumps in the road here and there, but with each bump I was soon back on course, following the rules and making everyone happy.

Ironically, my propensity for following the rules was the very thing keeping me from deeper obedience to God. The emotion-stuffing, impulse-restricting vice of the “good girl” can appear as innocuous clothing, yet disguise a hidden wardrobe of shame and fear.

Then I learned to break the rules. I broke free from enslavement to the expectations of others.

This kind of rule-breaking rebellion looks different than you might think. I didn't get a tattoo (although I haven't ruled it out). I didn't leave my family or my church or change my Gap-inspired monochromatic wardrobe. Plenty of people around me remain unaware of my journey and, to this day, attribute the good things in my life, including my spiritual vibrancy, to strict compliance to the rules. That's too bad, and not the truth.

Which is why I've decided to share a portion of my journey. I've dealt with issues surrounding physical and mental health, faith, abuse, addiction, motherhood, marriage, and depression, all while managing to keep up appearances and follow the rules. Until I learned a new way.

The Rules for Breaking the Rules

It's important to note that I did not set out to be a rebel. And I did not travel this road alone. My goal was to follow Jesus more faithfully, with more joy and more abandon, and this is where he led me. I surrounded myself with a community of fellow travelers who loved me through my wrestling. They helped keep me from needlessly offending too many people or retreating back to the safety of conformity. And along the way I found the Bible and thousands of years of church history littered with stories of similar-hearted rebels.

The challenge with breaking the rules, however, is discerning which rules to break and when. Once you leave the comfort of blind compliance and take responsibility for your own obedience to God, you will find the road quite perilous. It is impossible to do it perfectly, and imperfection is something a good girl hates.

The Benefits of Breaking the Rules

My rebel journey has been a most valuable and life-giving adventure. One that continues to progress with unforeseen twists, perilous land-slides, and unparalleled views.

On the way, I've fallen in love with Jesus in ways I never imagined I would. I've discovered rhythms and disciplines that help me connect more deeply with God, and I've attached myself to a community of others who are further along than I. The lingering effects of being assaulted as a teen are subsiding, and I'm no longer a slave to addiction. On many days I like who I am. My capacity to love God and other people continues to grow. I have learned a regular prayer practice that is creative and sometimes vibrant. I enjoy meditating on Scripture and often hear God speaking to me in the Bible's pages.

But I have not arrived.

One other thing I've learned is there are no guarantees of the outcome. The biblical story of Esther describes two rule-breaking women who fell upon drastically different fates. Esther is exceedingly compliant to her uncle Mordecai. So compliant, she agrees to have sex with the king as an audition to be queen. When Mordecai suggests she break the rules and appear before the king without an invitation, she hesitates,

knowing this offense is punishable by death. Ultimately she complies. Trusting this is God's plan for her, she bravely proclaims, "If I perish, I perish." Inspirational.

Her predecessor, Queen Vashti, was also a rule breaker. She refused to appear before her drunken husband and be objectified in front of his drunken friends. Seems reasonable. Only it cost her marriage, her position, and her influence. After the men sobered up, they realized that if the queen was allowed to refuse the summons of the king, it could set a bad precedent. They decided to send a message to any other woman who might think she could tell her husband no. They deposed her and promptly set up auditions for a more compliant successor. Not so inspirational.

My Unfinished Story

I should warn you that I am not an expert in anything—even my own story. My perspectives and memories are tainted by my biases, wounds, and humanness. As much as I've attempted to accurately recount key events, I know memory can be an unreliable historian. I have sometimes changed people's names and occasional details have been omitted to protect the privacy of those whose paths have intersected with mine.

These pages document portions of my life in the midst of the journey. If all goes well, I'll read this book in five years and cringe. The insights and freedoms that appear monumental today will hopefully seem elementary in relation to what God has shown me since I pressed *send* on my computer and ceased editing and crafting.

For this reason you may find yourself wondering if I'm qualified to write a spiritual memoir. Shouldn't these books be written by people who are a bit more put together? Probably. But this is what I have to offer, and I hope you may recognize parts of your own journey in mine and that in your journey God might meet you there.

I still wonder if I have published too early. The answer is yes, if my goal is to point you to a conclusion. But after a lengthy period of over-analyzing, I've realized this is not my purpose. Instead, I hope to share with you the beauty and the mess of the long, slow work of God. This is my story in the midst of the transformation.

Don't get me wrong; these are not fresh wounds for which I've only begun the healing process. This is a journey that began nearly thirty years ago and I've been diligent to do the difficult work of living in and working through the pain caused by others and the pain I have caused. But let me say it again—I have not arrived.

When I began the healing journey I was willing to commit a couple of years to pursuing health and holiness so I could get on with my life. Instead, I found a new way of living. On this path I have experienced more freedom and joy than I believed possible or dared hope for. And while I have come to accept the elusive reality of complete wholeness in this life, I am learning to dance in the approving smile of the God who loves me. Where shoulds and shame have less and less power.

But this kind of life is a battle. It's often easier to settle for a safe life of mild spiritual discontentment that keeps us busy with virtuous activity. So this road is not for those who cling to a spiritual formula promising safe travel and a predetermined outcome. The path of the rebel is as unique as each individual traveler. Danger and ambush are to be expected.

This journey is also not for the dissenter who fancies freedom without accountability or growth without pain. Discipline, perseverance, and a willingness to submit are topmost on the job description of a rule-breaking follower of Jesus.

Rule followers are asked to lay down the security of their rules, and rebels are asked to learn obedience.

Notes on Reading This Book

This book is not a manual but a journal. I've organized it into three movements: Leaning In, Letting Go, and Living Out. These are the large categories from which my journey has emerged but they overlap in more of an ever-widening circle than a sequential path. The first section chronicles the series of events that started me on this road, but the second section jumps around chronologically because life is messy and transformation takes a long time. The third section falls back into more of a linear sequence. You're smart. You'll figure it out.

As I've written, I've prayed. I've prayed that my story would not simply

be more noise. I've pondered what kind of person writes a book about herself. But ultimately I believe there is power in story. There has been healing in me as I've recounted it. And at the very least, you can celebrate with me as you see redemption unfold. But I pray that God may reveal more of himself to you as you enter into this sacred space with me. I don't know what you will discover as you read, but I have found that as I chose to let go of the shoulds and the shame that kept me cowering under an onerous weight, I found a terrifying and beautiful place where Love dwells. And I have never looked back.

May you discover this same Love.



Leaning In

An efficiently busy life that keeps us occupied without being harried and keeps our attention entirely on interesting outer things is probably more potentially destructive of spiritual growth than debauchery or alcohol or hard drugs.

—MORTON KELSEY

This is what the Sovereign LORD, the Holy One of Israel, says: “In repentance and rest is your salvation, in quietness and trust is your strength, but you would have none of it.”

—ISAIAH 30:15

CHAPTER 1

The Beautiful No

I felt the tension come in waves washing over my entire body. My husband, Richard, and I were sitting two feet from each other in the car, but the distance was growing rapidly. I had just announced to him my resignation from the litany of volunteer ministry roles I'd accumulated under his pastoral leadership over the past ten years.

I hadn't been coerced into saying yes to all these things. I had simply let life happen to me. But underneath the put-together exterior, I felt my soul shrinking and an internal storm brewing. Unfortunately for Richard, one of the truths of marriage is there are no isolated storms. My storm was now his storm, and in an instant I had altered the fabric of our marriage.

I focused my gaze straight ahead in an effort to keep from losing my nerve. "I'm done with ministry," I said again and with a greater effort to hold back tears. My lungs were failing me as I attempted in vain to take a slow, deep breath.

"Just like that? No discussion? You're just out?" He had no category under which to process this new revelation. There had been no warning, no outward signs of distress. Surely, he believed he had misunderstood me.

"I guess." My mind was reeling and my resolve fading. "Not forever. Just for the next year. I need to regroup."

Silence.

His anger at my unilateral decision coupled with his disbelief and confusion rendered him speechless and, for a moment, allowed me to stop trying to put a coherent thought together.

The next stoplight turned red, and Richard slowed the car to a halt. We sat motionless, both encased in our separate pain. I sighed loudly and withdrew to my corner, slouching closer to the car door. Each of us had taken a blow, and with this round over, we needed to rest for a moment and regroup.

The light turned green, signaling it was time to keep moving forward. I attempted again to explain what had seemed so clear and reasonable only an hour earlier. His jaw was set, and his eyes narrow. He showed all the signs of anger, but I sensed it was deeper than that.

I wondered what he was imagining. Could he be envisioning the same beautifully framed pictures of us I had envisioned, crashing to the ground and shattering? Pictures of the perfect ministry couple. Laboring together. Hand in hand changing the world. I knew these pictures needed to go or there would be no room for what God had for me. What I was less sure of at the moment was whether it had been necessary to break all that glass in the process. Perhaps I could have found a way to carefully open the frames and remove the pictures without causing so much damage. But all I could do now was try to keep from cutting myself on the shards.

And so began my rebel journey. A single no that forever changed my path. A messy, imperfect, beautiful no.

Into an Unknown Future

Fifteen years later I'm forced to acknowledge that, as defining moments go, this was not really earth shattering. More of a whimper than a battle cry, this scene, nonetheless, marked a line in the sand to which I've often returned as a reminder of both my strength and my weakness.

After a well-established history of living in "I should," I took a baby step toward "I desire." Though filled with shame for even having a desire, I stumbled forward into an unknown future. But how did I get here? Why all the drama and buildup for a single syllable word?

In hindsight, I had a history of stepping out in a different direction. I didn't always do what I perceived was expected of me, but I rarely defied an established authority—like the church or my husband—in the

process. At least not to their face. My rebellion was stealth. I waited until no one was paying attention, then slid in the back door—smiling my good-girl smile all the way.

Some people call that passive aggressive. I called it survival. Allow me to share a brief history.

The Early Journey

My gait was brisk and intentional. I wanted to run, but even more, I wanted to avoid attracting attention. Relieved to spot an open pay phone, I pulled the phone card from my backpack and mouthed the numbers as I pressed them on the keypad. I was a sophomore in college, cell phones had yet to be introduced, and I needed to talk to my mom.

I can't remember if she answered. I do remember why I called.

A few months earlier, my parents had dropped me off in Tempe, Arizona, where I began school at Arizona State University (ASU). After growing up in a Christian family in a rural, church-saturated community, attending twelve years of Christian school, and one year of Christian college, I had decided it was time to leave the protective bubble that was my life. From what I could see, the world out there seemed expansive and opportunity rich.

In a final act of maternal involvement, my mother had connected me to a fellow transfer from Iowa whose parents she knew, making my official friend tally one in a sea of forty thousand students. The weekend before school started, I attended a party at her apartment with enough alcohol, drugs, and sex to put us in the running for the soon-to-be-popular *Girls Gone Wild* series. Far from tempted to participate, I felt the deep ache of regret as life outside the bubble quickly lost its iridescent shine.

My first class—Anatomy/Physiology—convened in Murdock Hall and boasted more students than my small-town high school. In the first week, my professor used the phrase “the apes from which we evolved,” and I knew I was no longer in the proverbial Kansas (or Iowa). In Holistic Health, we engaged in lively discussions about auras, chakras, and, unexpectedly, abortion.

The phone call I made to my mom came after the abortion discussion.

In my class of thirty, I had been one of two students who stood up—literally—as being opposed to abortion. You’d think I’d remember the other stander, but I was too terrified to notice. There were questions I couldn’t answer, reasons I couldn’t articulate, and I knew I had just failed the test of living in the world. I wanted to go home.

I decided to stay, but my year was rocky. Every day on campus was an exercise in loneliness and self-hatred. So much for the rebel life.

While it was true that I had wanted to break out of my sheltered life, I picked ASU for a slightly less noble reason. During my year at a Christian college, I had begun exercising compulsively, and the warm temperatures of the desert southwest meant an outdoor track year round. I was just beginning to binge and purge, and I hoped a change of scenery would give me a fresh start. But not only were my old demons catching up to my move, new ones were meeting me there. My little experiment was quickly being derailed by depression and bulimia.

My path changed with a connection to a church community that loved me. I began a journey of emotional healing and spiritual transformation. I entered treatment for my eating disorder and worked my after-care program diligently. I grew by leaps and bounds, and I was living in a freedom I had never before experienced.

Life After Addiction

It wasn’t long before I was discipling other women and being invited into broader leadership roles. Out of that community, I also met my husband, Richard. He was one of my first friends and remained so through both the lows of my eating disorder and the long recovery. We could talk for hours. I was captivated by his humor, kindness, and generosity. I’d never met someone so authentic, articulate, or able to bring such freshness to God’s Word. Deep friendship ultimately blossomed into a dating relationship, and we were engaged soon after.

Our wedding seemingly marked the beginning of a great ministry partnership. We were both strong leaders who loved God and whose gifts appeared to complement each other. When Richard began seminary, I was able to be the primary breadwinner. When a ministry position became open earlier than we anticipated, I was his right-hand woman.

I would sing, speak, disciple, counsel, plan retreats, lead small groups, strategize—all while working a full-time job.

Ministry was difficult on so many fronts. We were at a large church where every Sunday our worth was measured by how many people showed up at our meeting. Every event was a gauge of our leadership and spiritual effectiveness, and other churches were viewed as competition.

In spite of all of that, I believed in the local church. It's where I had come to find my life and had received a second chance. I'd left a life of addiction and emptiness, and I wanted others to find that freedom, too. I certainly didn't want to go back to where I'd come from, and I filled my spare time with church activities—Bible studies, leadership meetings, camps, weekend events, and overseas trips. All that left little time for relationships with people outside the church.

I had returned to the bubble and by this time, I just wanted to escape it all. I wanted Richard to graduate from seminary and get a job so I didn't have to work and I could stay home and have babies and be the perfect pastor's wife. I knew I wouldn't be happy with that either, but it was the only other thing I knew to do.

Eventually, I got pregnant, but even with his full-time pastoral role I had to keep working part time to make ends meet. I was devastated. Actually, furious. So angry, in fact, that I didn't recognize the gift God had given me in working until many years later.

In retrospect, it was one of God's kindest gifts. It was during this time that I ended up leading a colleague to Christ and we started leading weekly Bible studies with our coworkers and their friends. None had a prior relationship with Jesus.

We met in the evening, and in spite of God's obvious favor and presence, it was a weekly battle to attend. I had to disregard the unspoken working-mom code: There shall be no evening or weekend commitments as penance for the regular abandonment of offspring. But it was the best decision I ever made, and I'm still amazed that God let me experience it.

There were no radical conversions, but lives were changed. Least of which, mine. It was so far from perfect and so beautiful. I made my boss cry, I got in an argument with a Mormon, and I missed a glaringly obvious good-Samaritan moment. But I had someone ask me straight out,

“So how do you become a Christian?” and I was able to give an answer. She didn’t want to be one; she just wanted to know what it took. And I was faithful to respond.

Moving from full time to part time took a surprising toll on my identity. I had pioneered a program allowing me to remain in management while working fewer hours, and I expected to experience relief and freedom. What I found was that I missed some of the perks and influence of my more profession-focused days.

But I did have the balanced life I was seeking. I was distributing mediocrity equally throughout my roles. Life as the mother of a newborn was more taxing than I had anticipated. I struggled on and off with depression, but I kept doing what was expected of me.

When our second child arrived, I stepped down from leadership at church but still attended most events and camps and overseas trips. In addition, I was starting to do more speaking with women’s groups around the area.

But it was child number three that opened up the chasm. Surprisingly, taking all three kids on a college mission trip deep into Mexico with our conversion van pulling a pop-up trailer wasn’t the final straw. Even the fact that I was nursing the youngest and potty training the middle child didn’t put me over the edge. But the end was near.

A few months later, I sat in a friend’s living room with seven other women, all of us sharing our stories. As I processed the pain and pace of the last ten years, the floodgates opened, and I realized I was done. With my body fighting exhaustion, my soul shriveling, and my emotions threatening mutiny, something needed to change.

The discussion moved to solutions, and I felt an enormous burden lifting. I was free and light and joyful. Feeling so good, in fact, that I didn’t want to wait a minute to get started. I had to tell Richard immediately so I could embark on my new path.

Deep down I knew my announcement would be met with a bit of resistance. But I had no idea how complicated it would be to unwind my ministry from my marriage, how controversial my decisions would soon become, or how time-consuming and difficult a new way of doing life would prove to be.