

Adventists Reflect
ON THE Life AND Ministry OF
Rachel Held Evans



Portrait of Rachel Held Evans by Gillian Gamble for the forthcoming book, Holy Troublemakers & Unconventional Saints by Daneen Akers.

BY DANEEN AKERS, MELODIE ROSCHMAN, SARI FORDHAM, ELIEL CRUZ, LILLY ARCHER,
JASON HINES, SETH PIERCE, TRUDY J. MORGAN-COLE, MICHAEL NIXON, AND ALICIA JOHNSTON

KEYWORDS: Rachel Held Evans, woman of valor, wrestling with God, justice and inclusion

Editor's Note: When Christian author Rachel Held Evans passed away on Saturday, May 4, 2019, at the age of 37, fellow Christians around the world mourned her unexpected death. Here, we gather some of the responses from Adventists, who were touched by her life and work, that came through over the first week after her death.



Rachel Held Evans died today. I don't know what to do with that information. It doesn't make any sense.

Most people haven't heard of her; she likely won't be memorialized on the cover of *Time* magazine or given an obituary in the *New York Times*. But she changed my life. When I read her memoir, *Searching for Sunday*, three years ago, it was the first time I had ever encountered someone feeling the same doubts I felt, clinging to the same loves I loved. From Rachel I found Nadia Bolz-Weber, Sarah Bessey, and Emmy Kegler, and all the women who I'm writing about for my dissertation.

I had the privilege of meeting her briefly last year at Why Christian, in the shadow of Duke Chapel. She had been signing books for an hour—she must have been tired—but she greeted me so warmly, gave me her full attention. She said she liked my new dress. When I told her about my research, she asked me to send it to her when I was done.

It's always strange, having a one-way relationship with someone, whether they're a writer or an actor or a politician. I laughed along with Rachel's escapades when she tried sewing or camping in her backyard during her Year of Biblical Womanhood. I read her blog about communion and breastfeeding her son, and it changed the way I thought about motherhood. I bought her books for friend after friend. When the Adventist Church refused to ordain women, Rachel sent us all messages of hope and support.

She gave me the sacraments, and the creed, and the liturgy.

She has a husband and a little boy and a baby girl who just had their life torn apart, and I don't know how to wrap my head around that. She went in for a minor infection two weeks ago. She was tweeting about *Game of Thrones*. Then she was having seizures. Then she was in a coma. And now she's gone.

She was 37.

How is any of this fair?

I don't know how to grieve someone I never knew. I don't know how to grieve someone who nevertheless changed the course of my life spiritually and academically. I don't know how to deal with the loss, and the gratitude, and the stupid waste of it.

Thank you, Rachel, for everything you gave us. *Eshet chayil*. Woman of valor.

—Melodie Roschman is a PhD in English student at University of Colorado, Boulder, entering her third year.

.....

When I learned that Rachel Held Evans was in a coma, I hijacked my husband Bryan who was walking through the living room. "Oh, no," I said. "Listen to this." Ever since we have been married,

he has seen me wrestle with staying in a denomination that will not ordain women ministers. Bryan isn't Adventist, but together we take our daughter to Sabbath School. I know he watches my church's politics and stays quiet, trusting me. And now, I realize that one of the reasons I have stayed is Rachel Held Evans, which is ironic because she left her evangelical church. But I have stayed, partly because her work made all of Christianity more welcoming. To everyone. She showed how you can walk in your faith authentically, ethically, honestly. That it's the only way. She was a voice of clarity and she will be missed.

—Sari Fordham is associate professor of English at La Sierra University.



I talked with Rachel Held Evans, a few days before she got ill, for her profile in the *Holy Troublemakers & Unconventional Saints* book. (She had a list a mile long of people she thought should be profiled too, of course, because Rachel was the most generous and humble person.) She told me about a formative moment for her faith when she was nine or ten years old.

She said she had severe eczema as a child. She often couldn't do PE at school, and her painful sores often bled onto her bedsheets. She said that while she knew now this was a relatively mild trauma in comparison to what other children suffer, it was the first thing that made her question God's goodness.

One especially bad night, her dad came into her room to check on her. He held her while she cried and asked in anger, "Why would God let this happen to me?" (Her dad was a theologian, a seminary professor, and an elder in their church—to young Rachel, he knew everything about God.)

Her dad said he didn't know, but he did know that God loved her. This became a formative moment for her faith journey. Her father's answer both gave her permission to question God—even to be angry—and also the foundation that she was forever a beloved of God.

She said Jacob wrestling with God became a favorite metaphor for our interaction with the Divine. She let us all in on her wrestling. Reading the #BecauseofRHE and

#SaintRachel hashtags on Twitter keeps reminding me how she gave us the gift her father gave her as a young child—the permission to wrestle with God and even to be angry. All the while, she also kept reassuring us of the complete Divine love we are always with, no matter where our journey takes us.

She also said she loved the mothering metaphors for God. She especially loved the metaphor of God the Mother Hen, gathering Her chicks under Her wings. I keep imagining Rachel in the great mystery of the beyond, somehow gathered next to God's soft, warm wings.

I hope she knows just how much her life, words, space-making, and fierce love protected us. I feel so grateful that my time on this planet intersected with hers. And I am so devastated that her time was cut short—for her family's sake (those sweet babies missing their mama!) and for us all. I hope we can be the kind of people she always believed we were.

—Daneen Akers is a writer, producer, teacher, mother, and author of the upcoming book, *Holy Troublemakers & Unconventional Saints*.



Rachel supported me through some of the hardest years I experienced while attending a Christian college. She gave me a platform to a Christian community when no one knew me, she invited me into her home, and it is because of her work that I have a shred of my faith left. It was an honor to call her a friend.

—Eliel Cruz is the director of communications at New York City Anti-Violence Project and an alumnus of Andrews University.



It was the golden age of Twitter, when the universe was smaller, and you did more learning than arguing. It was 2009. We found Rachel Held Evans and were immediately impressed. Someone our age (actually a little younger), intelligently wrestling with her conservative Christian background and this God that she loved but

She also said she loved the mothering metaphors for God. She especially loved the metaphor of God the Mother Hen, gathering Her chicks under Her wings. I keep imagining Rachel in the great mystery of the beyond, somehow gathered next to God’s soft, warm wings.

sometimes didn’t fully understand. Her ability to come to an understanding that worked for her in the spaces where she found herself resonated with us as Adventists. We felt connected to her journey because it tracked our own. The balance that she was able to strike between broad swaths of American Christianity—her love for the dedication and charisma of her evangelical background and the intellectualism calling to her from main-line Christianity. We felt the same tugging. Her curiosity stayed with us and bolstered our own.

Her effect ripples in our lives even though she’s gone: not just through her work that will always be with us, but through the Christian thinkers we admire who she introduced to us—names that pepper our conversation to this day as fellow travelers on the walk of faith—Jonathan Martin, Wil Gafney, Jen Hatmaker, Kristin Howerton, just to name a few. We remember her “Ask a...” series fondly. Not only because it included an Adventist, but because of how it brought us into connection with people we never see, and the way it helped to open our eyes to the LGBTQIA Christians in our midst (particularly the Transgender community) and it affects us to this day.

It’s hard to put into words what her sudden passing means to us. For someone we’ve barely met she had an indelible effect on our spirituality. We can only hope to help fill the space she leaves in our sphere of influence by helping create an environment where people can truly seek God—with all the questioning, wondering, and wandering a true search entails.

—Lilly Archer and Jason Hines. Lilly is an attorney in Orlando, Florida. Her husband Jason is an ethics professor at

AdventHealth University, board member of Adventist Forum, and columnist for Spectrum.



interacted with RHE and her work on Twitter and only just finished reading her latest book. She was an insightful, gracious, kind, humorous, and challenging voice for Jesus. She helped many who grew up in toxic fundamentalist faiths to discover a loving Jesus and to stay connected to Christianity. She leaves behind two babies and a husband as well as countless people who were helped by her work. Lift her family up in prayer and/or contribute to the GoFundMe set up to help her family cover medical expenses and other challenges that come with losing a parent/spouse. May God grant peace, healing, and hope to those who have been heartbroken by this loss.

—Seth Pierce is an author and speaker, and served as a pastor for sixteen years before accepting his current position as assistant professor of Communication at Union College.



In her first book, *Evolving in Monkeytown* (later re-released as *Faith Unraveled*), Rachel wrote about winning the Best Christian Attitude award as a schoolgirl, about winning Bible contests, about always being the girl with all the answers until too many questions crashed in upon her faith and changed it forever. When I discovered her first

book and her blog around 2010, I felt such a kinship with that little girl and the woman she became. Rachel was about fifteen years younger than I am, and her fundamentalist background differed from my Seventh-day Adventist upbringing—but we were similar in important ways. We both came from traditions that taught the importance of certainty—of always having the right answers. Her books helped give me permission to ask questions, to say “I don’t know,” to let my faith change and grow. I was always eager to see what subject Rachel would tackle next and what she would teach us about it. While I have faith that she will rise in glory, I’m sad and angry that her journey of discovery with us in this life has been cut cruelly short.

—*Trudy J. Morgan-Cole is author of numerous books, including many about women in the Bible. Her newest novel, Prone to Wander, follows five friends as they attend an Adventist high school and then scatter to very different places.*



Rachel Held Evans is a name that I had heard from time to time over the years, but I didn’t really dive into her work until late last year when my wife bought her book *Inspired*. I was instantly struck by her authenticity and boldness. Two quotes from that book that have stuck with me are as follows: “The apostles remembered what many modern Christians tend to forget—that what makes the gospel offensive isn’t who it keeps out, but who it lets in,” and “The church is not a group of people who believe all the same things; the church is a group of people caught up in the same story, with Jesus at the center.”

Those words resonated deeply within me as I was wrestling through a difficult season in my work at Andrews. It reminded me that the work of inclusion will continue to cost me a great deal, but it is the work of Christ’s cross. I will likely grieve her loss the most due to the fact that she was one of the few white Evangelical Christians who were intentional about advocating for historically marginalized and perpetually silenced

voices. Her work in centering the voices of black women, in particular, was particularly inspiring and heartwarming to me. As I expressed on Twitter in the wake of her death, it saddens me that most Adventists were completely unaware of her work, and the legacy she was crafting—particularly around being an advocate for justice and inclusion (an example that our denomination needs so desperately). Her grace and humility were the perfect model for the yet-to-be-addressed work of racial healing and truth-telling to which I dream one day our denomination will commit.

I thank God for all He did in and through Rachel and the way she allowed God to use her voice. She will be deeply missed. My sincerest prayers go out to her close friends and family. May others be inspired to pick up the torch and carry on the legacy that she was just starting to create, but was already able to impact so many.

—*Michael Nixon is vice president for diversity and inclusion at Andrews University.*



Rachel Held Evans is lost to us. We have lost her voice, her courage, her tenacity, and her incisive and raw appraisals of the realities and questions with which so many of us struggle. We will never be the same. I’m grateful for the words she left us and saddened that they are all we will get. I can’t imagine the pain of her family who has lost so much more than we can imagine. I’ve cried many times today. I’ve wrestled with the brazen and sudden way death can steal the most precious from our midst. I want to honor her memory, allow her courage and candor to inspire me, and love my people as well as I can for whatever time I have. She will always be missed.

—*Alicia Johnston is an advocate for full inclusion and affirmation of LGBTQ people, with particular focus on the Adventist Church. She is currently working on a book on the subject and preparing to launch a podcast.*

I'm still completely heartbroken over the death of Rachel Held Evans, and one way I want to honor her this Friday evening is to re-read her well-loved teaching about the Proverbs 31 woman, who is described as a woman of valor (in Hebrew, *eshet chayil*). Often, in Christian circles, she's been held up as an ideal all women are supposed to measure up to. Rachel wrote:

The bad news for the domestically-challenged among us is that the life of the Proverbs 31 woman is like a Pinterest board come to life: She rises before dawn each day, provides exotic food for her children, runs a profitable textile business, invests in real estate, cares for the poor, spends hours at the loom making clothes and coverings for her bed, and crafts holiday wreaths out of coffee filters. (Okay, so that last one was straight from Pinterest, but you get the idea.)

It was Rachel's friend, Ahava, an Orthodox Jewish woman from Israel, who had taught Rachel how to make challah for her *Year of Biblical Womanhood* book project, who gave Rachel the wisdom of Proverbs 31 from a Jewish perspective. Again, from Rachel:

"So do Jewish women struggle with this passage as much as Christian women?" I asked.

Ahava seemed a bit bewildered.

"Not at all!" she said. "In my culture, Proverbs 31 is a blessing."

Ahava repeated what I'd discovered in my research, that the first line of the Proverbs 31 poem—"a virtuous woman who can find?—is best translated, "a woman of valor who can find?" And in fact, the structure and diction employed in the poem more closely resembles that of a heroic poem celebrating the exploits of a warrior than a domestic to-do list. Like all good poems, it was intended to highlight the glory of the everyday; it was never meant to be used prescriptively as a to-do list or a command.

"Every week at the Sabbath table, my husband sings the Proverbs 31 poem to me," Ahava explained. "It's special because I know that no matter what I do or don't do, he praises me for

blessing the family with my energy and creativity. All women can do that in their own way. I bet you do as well."

In addition, she said, "eshet chayil"—woman of valor!—is invoked as a sort of spontaneous blessing in Jewish culture, Ahava said. Think of it as the Hebrew equivalent of "you go girl," or perhaps even better, "Carry on, Warrior."

And so, on this Friday night, the first since Rachel passed into the beyond, we will light a candle for her and say a blessing over her and our daughters, who enter a better world because Rachel and other women of valor have gone before.

A full essay from Rachel about women of valor as a blessing, not a prescriptive to-do list, is on Glennon Doyle's blog.¹

Endnote

1. <https://momastery.com/blog/2013/04/08/eshet-chayil-woman-of-valor-or-how-i-learned-the-hebrew-equivalent-of-carry-on-warrior/>

—Daneen Akers



A note on the artwork



The portrait of Rachel Held Evans featured in this article is for the upcoming *Holy Troublemakers & Unconventional Saints* book by Daneen Akers, and is used with permission. Daneen writes,

the artist is Gillian Gamble, a woman of valor who made time in the wee hours of the night this week to lovingly create this beautiful tribute art through her own tears. I love how she captured Rachel's warmth and radiance. And I love the nod to the Tree of Life on Rachel's necklace as the many tributes that have poured in on the #BecauseofRHE hashtag have shown just how life-giving Rachel's work and witness was. *Eshet Chayil*.