

## Transcript for the podcast “Worthy: Celebrating the Value of Women.”

**Hosts:** Elyse Fitzpatrick and Eric Schumacher

**Episode 40 — Guest:** Rachael Denhollander

**Date Aired:** November 2, 2020

---

**Elyse Fitzpatrick 00:06**

Welcome to Worthy, a Christian podcast that celebrates the value of women. Each week, we'll bring you conversations with women and men, on the value of women in the church, home, and society. We won't always agree on everything, but we do agree that God is glorious, the Bible is true, and women are valuable, and respectful conversation on this topic is essential in our day. Hi there, and welcome again, to the Worthy podcast. Thank you so much for being with us today. We're so thankful for all of you. We've heard from so many of you about how encouraging this podcast has been, and encouraging us to keep going. So thank you, for those of you who've contacted us. And thank you, for those of you who have rated and reviewed our podcast on whatever your podcasting platform is, we're thankful for that. And we want to encourage you that if this is something you think is helpful or meaningful, beneficial, please do rate and review us and share the podcast around with your friends. Eric suggests that you just go up to people at fast food restaurants and ask them if they listen. And then if they don't just go ahead and share it. So we're thankful for you. We're also thankful for our Patreon supporters. Although this podcast is free you, it's not free to us. And so if you would like to support us, no matter if that's just whatever a cup of coffee would cost you in a month, we would really appreciate that. And then you get all sorts of bonus goodies from being a Patreon supporter. Eric keeps wanting me to let him make a bobblehead doll of me. But I think that's a really bad idea.

**Eric Schumacher 02:35**

There's a lot of demand for that.

**Elyse Fitzpatrick 02:38**

If you think that's a good idea, then be a Patreon supporter and maybe I'll acquiesce. Anyway. So thanks for being with us. We are here today with a woman that I would say is a hero of mine. She'd hate to hear that. But I'm gonna say she's a hero of mine. And she's going to actually be with us for two podcasts. So the one you're listening to right now and then the next one, she'll be here with us. I'm going to tell you who she is. But I'm going to tell you how I think about her first, and in my mind I call her Jael because Jael is the woman who, as you know, in the Old Testament had the courage and the cunning and the skill to defeat Israel's enemy Sisera. And so maybe she wants to be Jael and maybe she doesn't, but I'm so happy to welcome Rachael Denhollander today to our podcast.

**Rachael Denhollander 03:47**

Thank you so much for having me.

**Elyse Fitzpatrick 03:49**

Sure. You're welcome. I forgot to say who else was with us? Eric Schumacher. You know, well, you all know he's there.

**Eric Schumacher 03:55**

I'm forgettable.

**Elyse Fitzpatrick** 03:58

My co-host, co-author, and we've decided for sure, co-belligerent. So we're really happy to have Rachael here. And if there is, you know, I know that God is sovereign. But I also know God uses means. In God's sovereign purpose to call out evil and wickedness, He's used Rachael, as means. And that's not an easy thing. That's very difficult thing for her, for her family, for the people who love her, for the life that she's living with her husband, Jacob and her children. And I'm thankful for her. So I'm going to tell you who she is in case you live in a yurt somewhere and have no idea.

**Eric Schumacher** 04:49

What do you have against people in yurts?

**Elyse Fitzpatrick** 04:51

Well, you know,

**Eric Schumacher** 04:52

I feel like there's gonna be an uprising of them.

**Elyse Fitzpatrick** 04:54

Well, they won't know because they won't be listening. So you know, you can pick on people in yurts because they don't listen.

**Eric Schumacher** 05:01

Okay. My son wants to build one.

**Elyse Fitzpatrick** 05:03

Well, okay, I had kids once that if I could have built it, a yurt, I would have sent them to live in it. So hey, that works.

**Eric Schumacher** 05:11

Well, if my son builds a yurt, I'm going to record a podcast episode from the yurt.

**Elyse Fitzpatrick** 05:16

Okay

**Rachael Denhollander** 05:16

Could we stay in a yurt until the election is over?

**Elyse Fitzpatrick** 05:19

Oh Please. Yes. Yes, please. Yes. Great idea. Okay, let me tell you who Rachael is. Rachael is an attorney, author, advocate, educator who's recognized as a leading voice on the topic of sexual abuse. That's not something you ever set out to be quite sure. She became internationally known in 2016 as the first woman to pursue criminal charges, and speak publicly against USA Gymnastics team, Dr.

Larry Nassar. One of the most prolific sexual abusers in recorded history. As a result of her activism, gosh, such courage, such, yeah, As a result of her activism, over 300 women, including numerous Olympic medalists came forward as survivors of Nassar's abuse, eventually leading to his imprisonment. In 2019, she published an autobiographical account of her experience, entitled, "What is a Girl Worth?: My Story of Breaking the Silence and Exposing the Truth About Larry Nassar and USA Gymnastics". And Rachael, I have to say I read it. And I really loved it, and I loved the fact that you gave your backstory. You talked about your life, and I want to talk about that as we get into this interview. Listeners, if you haven't read this book, you need to buy it and read it. You need to see how God is using courageous women to stand up against wickedness. She was named one of TIME Magazine's 100 Most Influential People in the World. Do you remind Jacob of that all the time? I hope so.

**Rachael Denhollander** 05:21  
Please?

**Eric Schumacher** 07:17  
I hope she brings up the Sports Illustrated Award.

**Rachael Denhollander** 07:20  
Okay the Sports Illustrated thing is a complete joke in our family, because if you guys have ever seen the movie, The Princess Diaries, that scene where she's having soccer balls kicked at her and she's like, I can't do this. I am a girl, a yoga doing, rock climbing sort of girl, that epitomizes me. So it is a running joke in our house because I am not an athletic individual in any way, shape, or form.

**Elyse Fitzpatrick** 07:48  
I love it. You know, it's always wonderful, you know what they, what people want to say about you. Anyway, she's a member of the California Bar Association, and she's educated attorneys on the dynamics of sexual abuse at the American Bar Association's sports law forum. And she's a commencement speaker at the graduation seminary of Brandeis School of Law in 2018. And she holds a Juris Doctorate from Oak Bridge College of Law. She lives in Louisville with her husband Jacob, and their four young children. Okay, there we go. That's that's our friend, Jael.

**Rachael Denhollander** 08:27  
She's busy.

**Elyse Fitzpatrick** 08:28  
Yeah, yeah, she's an underachiever. And we keep having all of these underachievers on the show just to just to let people know that it's okay to be an underachiever. So, welcome, Rachael, thank you for being here.

**Rachael Denhollander** 08:45  
It's a pleasure. I've been looking forward to it.

**Elyse Fitzpatrick** 08:48

Thank you. You speak warmly, about your childhood in your book. And so tell us about your childhood and your faith journey and the uniqueness of being raised in a strong and loving homeschool family.

**Rachael Denhollander** 09:04

I really, you know, I look back on my childhood, and I really do think it's been the saving grace in my life, particularly after having suffered trauma, because the stability and the example that I had in childhood of healthy masculinity, healthy femininity, a healthy marriage, godly sexuality. I had all those things to fall back on, when I suffered abuse myself. And I have a picture of what normal and good and beautiful should look like. I'm deeply grateful for that. You know, I get asked the question a lot, you know, but is there anything your parents could have done differently? Because we're all searching for a way to make sure this doesn't happen to our kids. And something I wrestle with a lot as a mom myself is that when I look back at my childhood, I really don't think there was anything my parents could have done better. We had very open communication on really everything including issues of sexuality and abuse. My parents were the type of parents who would come to us when they made a mistake and say, hey, I was not right when I did this, you know, and I need to repent to you. They reminded us constantly that we are God's authority over you, but we are under authority, and our authority is limited. And we have to use our authority in a way that is right and godly, and within the God given bounds, or we're sinning too. And I'm very grateful for that, because I had that framework and that structure to fall back on. You know, and I know there's the, the stereotype of the sheltered homeschooler, who just doesn't know any better, and winds up abused, that really wasn't the case for me. We talked very openly about abuse, and my mom is a survivor, she had shared a lot of her story and her and her journey and her healing and recovery. We were not sheltered from the realities of abuse, I was around eight to nine years old, when we first were walking alongside a domestic abuse victim, who was escaping an abusive marriage with her three children. And they were very dear friends of ours. And I remember holding her at nine years old that she wept on my shoulder. And I'm really grateful for those experiences. Because my parents were very careful to, to teach us the reality of suffering and God's heart for suffering, and to and to teach us how to enter into that grief. And so I really don't fit that stereotypical idea of somebody who's overly sheltered and just winds up in a situation that they don't know what to do with. My parents taught us how to speak up, my mom would actually practice with us, you know, if you're in a situation where someone is doing something they shouldn't do. Hey, here's how you handle it. Practice this on me. She taught us to say things like, you're old enough to know better, if someone is bullying us on the playground. They gave us permission to defend ourselves, but also gave us you know, a healthy framework for that defense, you you do what is necessary to keep people safe, but you never lash out in anger. And so they were very intentional with teaching all of those concepts. And I do think those concepts gave me a framework that really saved me when I when I did suffer trauma, because I had a sense of normalcy to fall back on. And as difficult and painful as the trauma was, I had an idea of what good and beautiful was, and that was my sense of normalcy, so I could recognize the brokenness, because I had seen wholeness.

**Eric Schumacher** 12:25

Yeah, that's great. I, thank you for writing your book. And for telling your story. I read your book, and I loved it. I mean, in in the ways that you can love that story, it's, it's not an easy story at all. But I love so much about it. Particularly what I loved was that like Elyse mentioned, your background, you including, you know, I think people might be interested in reading the book and get into the details about Larry

Nassar and the gymnastics, but your childhood and your upbringing, I think was so important to the story and has a lot of lessons to teach us. And, you know, Elyse compared you to Jael, I think when I read the book, I thought about a lot about Esther, you know, for such a time as this. And what really struck me as I read, the opening parts of it was learning about your personality as a kid. You in many ways, you can correct me if I'm wrong, but were designed by God to be a lawyer. And, you know, just the way you think.

**Rachael Denhollander** 13:36

I think that's fair.

**Eric Schumacher** 13:38

Good. And, and you talk about how you, you weren't necessarily designed to be a gymnast. Is that fair to say?

**Rachael Denhollander** 13:47

Nope.

**Eric Schumacher** 13:48

So no?

**Rachael Denhollander** 13:49

Oh that's absolutely fair to say. I did it because I loved it, but I was awful. I was awful.

**Eric Schumacher** 13:53

Yes. So not a not a gymnast build, you started late in gymnast and you know, in practicing gymnastics, but I think about how God took your perseverance to to do gymnastics like you you wanted to do that, and you were gonna do it, and your parents let you and you were, I just feel like you were designed to be the woman that would stand up in this situation, and God put you in a particular place. And so just thank you for being that woman. I'm wondering, not just in terms of how to respond to abuse or trauma when you experience it, but how did your parents nurture just your intellectual interests and that sort of thing.

**Rachael Denhollander** 14:48

I think with great fear and trepidation. I was a, my diligence stood out early. Which is to say I was a very stubborn child. I was very strong willed. And it was not an inflammatory, angry, strong will, it was just a very calm, well, that's nice, but here's my rationale, and I'm quite confident, I'm correct, so I'm going to continue doing it, what I what I desire to do, and I'm going to explain to you why this is better, and this is actually more helpful to you, even though I'm four years old. That that was my personality. My mom always says, the understanding the concept of passive rebellion was groundbreaking for her in parenting, because it typically found doing something that was very good, but not what I have been asked to do. And so one, that one concept that my parents, two things really, that they taught us, that were really foundational, in my approach to, to gifts and to strengths and weaknesses, my parents always told us, your greatest weaknesses, if channeled properly, in God's hands can become your greatest strength. Hmm. And so, you know, for example, rebellion and stubbornness. When it's

channeled properly, that becomes a firm commitment to justice and to truth and an unwillingness to back down. And so my parents would talk to us about the things that we struggled with the sins that we had, and say, look, this is what it can be in God's hands. But these are the dangers if you continue following this as weakness, if you continue following these patterns as sinful patterns, but if you submit this sin to God, and you submit yourself to God, this is what he can do with this, with those characteristics. And the other thing that they really taught us, and I get asked a lot is there is there a Bible story that you identify with most, I actually identified most with the parable of the talents. And because that was something my parents just talked to us about all the time, you are responsible with what you are given. And there is always going to be someone smarter than you, there's always going to be someone who is not as gifted as you, and you are responsible with what you're given. We rejoice in the gifts that everybody has. And we do our best to use what we're given to the glory of God faithfully. And if that means you are a janitor, or you're a stay at home mom, or your world famous missionary, whatever that looks like, wherever God has called you, whatever He has given you to do, that is the highest calling. And I really appreciated that because it helped foster a sense of community in the family. It helped us learn not to compete with each other as siblings, but to rejoice with each other. It helped us find our identities, not in our successes or achievements or our abilities, to not use those as sources of pride, but as sources of privilege and ask that question, what do I do with what I've been given? Yeah, and I really do think that was a very foundational concept, especially when it came to speaking out publicly. Because the reality is, if I had if I define success, at any point in my life, if I define success as reaching a particular goal, and I don't reach that goal, then the result to me is [inaudible]. And most of the time, the way we define success isn't something that's really within our control. Like Proverbs says, repeatedly, the horse is prepared for battle, that victory is in the hands of the Lord, were faithful to be prepared for that battle. And that had to be my approach with speaking up with Larry. I had no idea where we were going to get, at any point in time, the process could have and almost was over and over again, stopped, he almost went free over and over again. And so I couldn't have my identity, my value, my definition of success. None of that could be tied up in the result that I got. I had to simply be faithful every day with what I was given faithful with the children that I had before me, faithful in my communications, with attorneys, faithful in my legal investigation, faithful in working with the journalists, whatever, I was given that particular day, at that particular moment, I needed to be faithful with it. And when you can go to bed at night, and you know, you've been faithful with what God has given you. That is success. And we and that allows you and frees you to find your identity and your value and your worth in Christ. It frees you from a sense of competition, it frees you from pride and arrogance, with the skills that you do have. And it helps you refocus as being, you know, finding your value and identity in Christ. And so that was just that was a foundational concept that my parents worked with us on over and over again. And I'm deeply grateful for that. I really do think it formed a lot of the basis for what God prepared me for later.

**Elyse Fitzpatrick** 19:35

It seems like and we can cut this if this is not right, but it seems like Rachael, in your book, you talk a lot about your mom saying love, love doesn't just let things happen. Love speaks up or something like that. Is there something that your mom said along those lines?

**Rachael Denhollander** 19:55

There were, I think the way my parents approached it, the way I would articulate it was that love was central. Love had to be your motivation. And when love is your motivation, it helps you speak with tenderness and compassion. But it also emphasizes to you the importance of not being silent. It brings those two concepts of mercy and justice into perspective, it brings them into harmony, it helps you understand how you can love someone who has harmed you, or demonstrate love to someone who has harmed you, demonstrate forgiveness and mercy to someone who has harmed you, and at the same time, pursue justice. You know, and of course, you know, as children growing up, it was sometimes very simple things like, you know, you're right, you need to forgive your brother for breaking this particular object that you had, but your brother is also going to have to make restitution. Yeah. And so just blending that those concepts of justice and forgiveness and mercy and grace, when love is your central focus, it brings all those concepts together. And it, the Bible is so clear on the centrality of love. And I think this is something we miss over and over and over again, is that the two greatest commandments are to love the Lord your God. And to love your neighbor as yourself. When you truly do that, you have to care A: about the things that break God's heart. You have to be angered at the things that anger God, you have to be grieved at the things that anger, at that grief God You also have to care about the impact on the people around you. And that's something I tell my children all the time now, with four of them in the household, we have ample opportunity to talk about wise decision making, because four kids do a lot of things in the day. And a lot of it's not very smart. And when when we have those conversations if discipline needs to be meted out, I always tell them, there are two reasons you can make a decision. You can choose to do what's right, because you care about the people around you. You love the people around you, and you don't want the people around you to suffer the consequences of your bad decisions. And I hope you will choose to be motivated by love. Because when you're motivated by love, that's what makes doing the hard thing have joy and peace, even when it's incredibly painful and difficult. But if you're not going to be motivated by love, mommy and daddy are going to have to put consequences in place. Because it's not loving to you to let you keep harming your siblings. And it's not loving to you to let you keep in these destructive patterns. But you always have a choice what you're motivated by. And your motivation is going to define who you become and why you do what you do. And how tightly you cling to what is right and beautiful and good when those external consequences are taken away. And that was just a really central focus in my home growing up was to be motivated by love.

**Eric Schumacher** 22:49

That's that's a that's beautiful. That's great. I'm curious, I think I've read on Twitter that there might be some passively disobedient children in your home.

**Rachael Denhollander** 23:01

Oh, man, my son is me. My nine year old son, he just turned nine, he is me through and through.

**Eric Schumacher** 23:10

And was reading about stacks of books hidden in the bathtub for late night reading?

**Rachael Denhollander** 23:17

Yeah, that was the six year old. Yep, my all of my children have have the ability to do all kinds of things creatively.

**Eric Schumacher** 23:27

That's good.

**Rachael Denhollander** 23:29

It is a sanctifying challenge.

**Eric Schumacher** 23:31

It is. We have five in our home and teaching them to use those things for good is interesting and fun. Tell us a little bit about your your experience in gymnastics. When did you get into it and what did you love about it and what about it wasn't good, apart from apart from the abuse?

**Rachael Denhollander** 23:55

So I didn't start till I was almost 12. And the reason for that is gymnastics is a really expensive sport. And my family just couldn't afford it. But I started babysitting right after I turned 11. And so I was able to start saving up money and I told them like I will help pay for the gym fees. It's it was that kind of opened the door for me to be able to start. And there were a couple things I loved about it. I loved that it did not involve a ball, so there was nothing flying at my face. I thought that was great. But I loved, I loved the combination of the mental and the physical. You have to be very focused, you really do and this is one of the positive things that can come out of gymnastics if it's approached from a healthy perspective. It really does teach you how to train your mind. It teaches you a lot of perseverance. But it can take months to master a particular skill in gymnastics. And that was something I loved with coaching was to be able to talk to the kids about seeing their work, their hard work and their diligence pay off over an extended time period. There's no instant gratification in gymnastics, but you do learn the concept of working hard for a delayed reward. And you learn how to be happy with the job you've done when you've been faithful when you've done the best that you can do. And that really influenced a lot of the way I coached to, when I worked with young athletes, you could work with one child and you know, child A gets the skill in two weeks, and child B doesn't have it two months later. And how you talk to that child has a massive impact on how they see themselves and how they understand their work. And so as a coach, I was very careful. See, I'm so proud of your hard work. And when a child achieved a skill, it wasn't, I'm so glad you've got that skill, or I'm so proud of you for doing this skills. I'm so proud of all the work you put into getting that skill. And as an athlete, I loved that about gymnastics. I love the combination, the mental and the physical. I loved the amount of dedication it took, I loved that it was a very beautiful sport, you take something very difficult, and you make it look beautiful. I just loved that I loved all of it. And I was very blessed to be in a healthy gym atmosphere. And I know now how abnormal that is that is due in part to my parents diligence, they selected a gym that had a lot of features they were looking for, like the fact that the gym wasn't walled off so that the parents could hear and see what was going on in that gym at all times. They selected a gym where the parents always traveled with the athletes to competitions so that the athletes in the parents were not separated from each other. And my mom stayed at practices and she watched and that's a big, that's a big time commitment. But my mom was my mom or dad were always there, watching what was going on in the gym and just being very vigilant and diligent. And so the gym I was in was an incredibly healthy gym, very healthy relationship between the teammates, very healthy relationships with our coaches, very healthy coaching styles. And I'm deeply grateful for that. But that being said, we were aware that that

wasn't necessarily typical. Gymnastics is a sport that is rife with a lot of abuse in in all shapes and sizes. So a lot of the gyms some of the most prominent gyms in Michigan, that I was aware of, and this has come out during the Nasser investigation, but one of the most prominent gyms in Michigan was named Twistars. And it was run by a man named John Gettert. And Gettert's abuse preceded him. We all knew about his athletes not being allowed to eat. We all saw the temper tantrums that John threw. We knew how he screamed, and emotionally abused his athletes. We knew about some of the physical abuse, throwing equipment at the girls, throwing the girls, you know, hitting them, sometimes causing severe injury. We knew how he pushed his athletes well past what they were physically capable of, and forced them to train on injuries that were very dangerous. And one of the things that bothered me the most as an athlete, even at 13-14 years old, was just that nobody ever said anything about John. It wasn't hidden. Everybody knew. Everybody talked about it, and nobody ever said anything. In fact, John ended up being named the USAG Olympic coach for the 2012 Olympic Games. And I remember the athletes and the coaches at that time, I was coaching, and the coaches in the gym, just saying how terrible this was going to be for the Olympic athletes, because the abuse wasn't a secret. Yeah, and I think that's a dynamic that we really have to grapple with a lot. We want to think that the abuse operates in the dark, and you just you just can't know there's no way to find out. That's rarely true. Very rarely true. Usually, it's because the people who see it are turning a blind eye. And they're accepting what's taking place as normal behavior. And that's what happens in gymnastics, and it's happening still to this day.

**Elyse Fitzpatrick 28:50**

Um, so, Rachael, when did you first realize that the treatments that Dr. Nasser was performing with your mother in the room, which is so mind blowing, were aberrant, and what motivated you to finally go public?

**Rachael Denhollander 29:12**

So I started seeing Larry, when I was just at just past my 15th birthday, I had some chronic wrist and back injuries and I had been to multiple doctors, and sports medicine doctors by and large just don't know what to do with a gymnast. They don't know the physics of gymnastics, they don't understand the sport. They're not able to give a whole lot of guidance for rehabilitating an injury, they often don't understand the causes to a stress related injury in gymnastics. And so I just kept getting told by all these physicians well just take a rest. Start with six weeks, start with eight weeks. That's a lifetime in gymnastics. And they couldn't give me any guidance on what was or wasn't safe to do. So after multiple attempts, trying and failing to get good medical care, we eventually ended up at Larry's office, because at that point in time, Larry was and had been the team physician for our Olympic Gymnastics team. He was the medical coordinator for our elite gymnastics program. So he tried, he treated all of our elite athletes. He actually treated several international athletes as well, he treated some of the elite figure skaters, some of the PGA golfers. He was one of the most respected physicians in the world of sports medicine. He held patents on a couple of different pieces of medical equipment. And his book on conditioning and injury rehab in gymnastics was considered the gold standard. So the opportunity to get to see Larry felt like an incredible privilege. I was this no name gymnast from Kalamazoo, Michigan. I was never going to be anything. I was sucky level five at best. And I got to see the doctor that the Olympians saw. And I thought if USAG is trusting their elite athletes to this person, he has got to be the best out there. And I had the added disadvantage of knowing that pelvic floor therapy was a category of

medicine because I knew some physical therapists who practiced it. So in the beginning, when Larry began abusing, I assumed that this was the pelvic floor therapy we had talked about. And so I and I also assumed that my mom could see what was taking place. And again, this is one of those dynamics of abuse that we really have to grapple with. Abuse very often doesn't happen in the dark. It often happens in contexts and with and with people that we think it's impossible to happen. And abusers know that. They create those circumstances. A lot of the coaches that we know now, were abusing at USAG, a lot of them would abuse their athletes right out on the floor during practice. They would just strategically position a mat or position their own body to block the view of the parents while they were sexually assaulting these little girls under their leotards while they were spotting them. And that's not abnormal. Some of the victims from the Sovereign Grace Church situation were abuse right out in the open. While they were on playdates with their friends, literally 10-15 feet from their parents. Kids often don't know that they're being abused, or they're so overcome with the shock of it or the confusion of it that they don't ever say anything. And so abusers are often able to abuse right in front of the parents or in very public situations, knowing that the victims will freeze and not be able to speak up, or that they will be confused and not know what's going on. Or if the victim does speak up that our automatic societal response is, well that's not possible. Yeah. Because how could that happen so publicly. And that was something that I very much fell prey to. When Larry was abusing, my mom was right there in the room, I didn't realize that she couldn't see what he was doing. So I never told her, because I didn't know I needed to tell her. He was able to use the relationship, one of the relationships that I valued the most, my trust in my mother and wield it like a weapon. And so you know, my perspective was well, Mom will say something if there's something wrong. Mom couldn't say something, because she couldn't see what was going on, and she thought I would tell her anything. You know, of course, Rachael will tell me if something's wrong, I didn't know I need to do. And so it just created this dynamic where we just had no idea what the other person didn't know. And so that that abuse went on for well over a year. And at some point, at some point in time, Mom and I had a conversation and she became aware that he was doing internal treatments, treatments. And we had a conversation at that point. You know, and and the conversation we had was, well he clearly does this regularly, because we knew by that point in time, he was doing it to many other athletes. And we knew pelvic floor therapy could be a category of medicine. We knew physical therapists who practiced it, we knew people who had gotten it. What we didn't know was that what Larry was doing didn't resemble legitimate pelvic floor therapy. But my train of thought was he's clearly doing this, you know, regularly. It's not a secret that he's doing this. There's no way others before me haven't described what he's been doing. Surely if someone described this, and Larry wasn't trained in legitimate pelvic floor therapy, surely somebody would say something. And so I didn't just trust Larry, I trusted the systems that surrounded him. I trusted the other authority figures at those institutions. And what we now know is that I was right on the first two points. He was doing, it every day, to literally dozens of girls every day. And there had been a lot of people that had described what was going on. By the time I walked in Larry's door, there had been at least four different reports. It had been reported to the MSU head gymnastics coach Kathie Klages by two separate teenagers. It had been reported to the track coach, and it had been reported to the softball coach. So there were three different athletic departments that already had been told in graphic detail what Larry was doing before I even walked in that door, and nobody said anything. So my trust in those authority figures was grossly misplaced, and it cost me dearly. And then closer to the two year mark. Larry did something that I couldn't rationalize away and I knew at that point, that was when there's this massive confusion of who is this person? I thought I was being treated by this person but I know he just sexually assaulted me.

That means he's not who I think he is. I'm probably not the first, what else don't I know. And I didn't disclose to my mom for about a year because the confusion and the shock and the shame and just not knowing what to do with that information was so extreme. But when I did start talking to her about it, that's when we started having a conversation. Do you think it's possible that the pelvic floor therapy wasn't actually therapy. And we started doing some general research, we started talking in very nondescript terms to some other physical therapists who did practice pelvic floor therapy. And the answers we got, were not the answers I wanted. Because it was really confirming over and over again, this isn't lining up. It's just not adding up. And it really was a very, it was a long process of researching and talking to experts and to really get a grasp of what was going on. And to be honest, I thought until the day I reported it, I thought Larry was trained in pelvic floor therapy, and he was using that certification as as a cover for abuse. Because I knew from talking to physical therapists, before he even saw him, I knew it was a very specialized form of therapy. There were only a few institutes that taught it, you didn't learn it under normal medical school, it was independent certification and training. So I presumed that Larry had this training, and he was operating under the guise of having the training. But when I reported to the police, and when I reported to the Indy Star, what he came back with was that he didn't do internal pelvic floor therapy. And the reason he said that was because he had actually never been trained. He had no certification, there was no legitimacy or even a veil of legitimacy. Had anybody at any point in time asked one question, [inaudible], in that first report in 1997, he could have immediately been stopped, because there was a new veil of legitimacy over it. And I assumed up until that point that he was at least trained. And he wasn't, it was just that nobody bothered to ask for 30 years, nobody bothered ask.

**Eric Schumacher 37:12**

Could you describe a bit of how Larry related to you and your mom. Was he awkward, friendly, family-like?

**Rachael Denhollander 37:21**

He was the way most abusers are. He was very gregarious. He was very warm, very outgoing. He was almost this funny, kind, nerdy, but also larger than life personality. The man was able to do everything. He volunteered at the local high schools, he ran a charity for autistic children, he was the medical coordinator for a couple of the big gymnastic centers in Michigan, he was the Olympic team doctor. And yet he still had the time to see this, you know, no name level five gymnast from Kalamazoo, Michigan. He was the type of person that made you feel like you were going to be taken care of, you know, he showed interest in who I was and who my parents were. He would chat with my mom about homeschooling. And he looked through my anatomy and physiology textbook, and he would talk with me about, you know, homeschooling and my homework and just took a really personal interest in our lives. And he was a very warm, caring, reassuring, I'm going to take care of you, sort of individual. And again, that's, yeah, that is not abnormal. Abusers are very skilled manipulators. They're often they're often very skilled communicators. And that's part of how they're able to continue getting away with abusing or covering up abuse. They often do a lot of really good things. And we see this over and over again, in the church context. Some of the worst cover ups, or the worst abusers in the church have been pastors who are very high up in the speaking circuits. They are larger than life dynamic preachers. And we are so enamored with the good things we see them doing, that it's just unthinkable they could be this other person. And that's very much the way it was with Larry, it was unthinkable, that

he could be this other person. And yet all of those things you're seeing on the outside, that was really the cover. That was what allowed him access. You know, and I know we grapple with this a lot in society. The first response that victims often get when they disclose is well, that's not possible, because... And then there's some reason why the person thinks that the abuse couldn't have occurred, this person couldn't be an abuser, or this person couldn't have covered up wrongly handled abuse. And what we need to understand is that those very dynamics that are making us go that's not possible, that's actually the very dynamics making it possible. That's what's creating the situation to allow the abuse to continue. Whether you're speaking of the abuser, or the enabler, those are the very dynamics and we play right into the manipulation. We do exactly what the abuser or the enabler wants us to do when we have that automatic knee jerk. That's not possible because...

**Elyse Fitzpatrick** 40:02

You know, that's one of the things that as we, thank you for that, Rachael, as we have talked with people who are working in the area of domestic abuse, sexual abuse, institutional abuse, where it's so easy, I think for, particularly like for a pastor, when somebody comes in and says, oh, so and so is doing this, but then the pastor says, this is really a good guy. This is a solid person, this is a friend. Oh, this guy really gets the gospel. How could this person how could this person do this? That, it's so important what you just said, that the abusive personality, the person who would do this, is so often a manipulator, a person who's so skilled at covering what he is, that everyone automatically trusts him.

**Rachael Denhollander** 41:03

And it gets even more difficult in the church context, because those who abuse in church context or those who enable abuse in church context, they know all the right things to say. They know all the theology, they know the right Bible verses to quote, they know how to wield and manipulate those scriptural truths to be tools of silencing instead of tools of accountability. They know how to feign repentance. And we see this all the time with abusers. Typically, when abusers are caught, they're not belligerent. They cry, they talk about how sorry they are. They become this almost cowed personality until they're restored. And the manipulation is complete. And they're put back in a position of power. And that is a mistake that pastors and those of us in the church make over and over again, as we fail to see the manipulation. We fail to push for true biblical, genuine repentance and the fruits of repentance, we fail to have the consequences for that type of abuse that should be taking place. And we want to jump right to the good feeling of restoration. It makes everybody feel good to have a great restoration story with a nice, pretty little bow on top. But that's not the way it typically works in abusive situations. And in the church context, that manipulation is just exponentially heightened by the ability to use their biblical godly sounding language and scripture.

**Eric Schumacher** 42:32

Yeah. And they can play that cycle over and over again, and celebrate. Look at how gospel centered we are that, you know, we forgive when, when these things happen. And that's, that's dangerous. Thanks for joining us for part one of our conversation with Rachael Denhollander. It will conclude next week on the Worthy podcast. Thanks for listening.