

4 gifts Rachel Held Evans gave us

Rachel grasped the true arc of Christianity: that death comes before life, that doubt comes before belief, that the gospel comes to us in a world that is sick.

by [Katelyn Beaty](#)

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Rachel Held Evans. Photo courtesy of Maki Evans.

(RNS) — When the heartbreaking [news](#) came this weekend that Rachel Held Evans had passed away after enduring a medical coma for three weeks, it quickly became clear just how many people she had touched.

Testimonies poured out from across the spiritual spectrum.

Evans, in just 37 years of life, had done more to preach the wildly expansive love of God than most will do in a lifetime.

I knew Rachel mostly through emails and tweets over the years.

We met a couple of times at conferences, where she was shy and sweetly Southern. Despite our brief in-person interactions, however, she was a constant source of encouragement, cheering me on with *Eshet Chayil!* — “woman of valor” — whenever I wrote something on the Internet that some people (mostly men, it seemed) didn’t like.

It is hard to overestimate the power of such camaraderie and grit.

Rachel gave us many gifts through her writing and speaking — in part because, while her writing was very public, it was also very personal. Her ability to minister to millions through her blogging and best-selling books was measured by how much of herself she gave us on the page. Rachel was generous with her own story; hers were not theoretical musings but deeply lived questions, doubts, and insights on faith that she knew in her bones. Because of that, others grew less alone, less afraid, in their own lives of faith.

Knowing that the list could be much longer, here are 4 gifts that Rachel gave us:

Rachel paved the way for other women in a theological landscape dominated by men.

In 2007, when the Christian blogosphere was mostly pastors’ musings on one hand and women’s devotional “encouragement” on the other, Rachel wrote confidently that her mind was made to know God — to “stand before Jesus on her own soul’s two feet,” to quote Rachel’s dear friend Sarah Bessey.

Never fitting the “traditional Christian woman” mold (thank goodness), Rachel labored to untangle Christianity from cultural norms that told women to be quiet and let men do the theological heavy lifting. She studied the Scriptures, taking them seriously enough to live out their commands for a year. The result, “A Year of Biblical Womanhood” (2012), showed the ways gender roles in the church were often not based in Scripture but in manmade attitudes that contradicted Jesus’ liberating message for women.

Long before #metoo and #churchtoo, Rachel's writing not only inspired other women across the theological spectrum to blog, teach, and write books; it inspired women to attend seminary and pursue preaching and leading churches.

As Abby Norman [tweeted](#) this weekend, "I graduate from @CandlerTheology next week, and am the pastor of a church and if I had to pinpoint how that all started I would say I found @rachelheldevans on the internet and she showed me the way."

Rachel expanded the definition of "Christian."

Like many millennials who grew up evangelical, Rachel questioned the strictures of her childhood faith: its six-day creationism, its treatment of women and LGBTQ persons, and its alliance with political conservatism.

In 2013, she [noted](#) the ways fellow millennials "perceive evangelical Christianity to be too political, too exclusive, old-fashioned, unconcerned with social justice and hostile to lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people."

Today's #exvangelical movement reflects a generation brought up on the notion that to question one's theological elders means defying God or "backsliding" into atheism.

Yet instead of throwing out God or church, Rachel demonstrated a robust Christian faith outside the bounds of evangelicalism. She showed that that world's gatekeepers, its voracious "discernment bloggers," don't have the final say about one's standing before Christ.

In "Searching for Sunday," Rachel traced her journey from a low-church background to the liturgy and sacraments of the Episcopal church. That pivot lost some fans, but she gained many more in the mainline church and among the agnostic and questioning.

Along the way, she helped many readers stay tethered to faith when they wanted to bolt.

Artist William Matthews said that "Searching for Sunday" "rescued my faith in a time when I was deeply cynical."

“Rachel Held Evans’ writing made me laugh, made me teary eyed but most importantly she made me remember the best of what faith gave me,” [wrote](#) Matthews.

Rachel embraced the shadow side of faith.

Rachel’s final blog [post](#) was, fittingly, about taking the season of Lent to grieve well. She wrote that the “path of lament is a well-worn one for me,” that “death is a part of life.”

I gravitated toward Rachel’s writing because it was the opposite of Christianese — of papering over life’s pain and difficulty with verbal novocaine in the name of Jesus. Instead, Rachel sat with the bruises of faith. She felt them, named them, showed them to us, even though she didn’t have to.

She wrote unflinchingly about how hard it is to trust God, to forgive church leaders, to wrestle with Scripture. There was a quiet sadness to her writing, a grief over having lost a simpler faith and faith community.

All of this meant that Rachel grasped the true arc of Christianity: that death comes before life, that doubt comes before belief, that the gospel of Jesus comes to us in a world sick with pain, loss, brokenness, and, as we know too well, senseless death.

“RHE taught the beauty of a messy and complicated faith,” [wrote](#) Cristina Rosetti on Twitter. “She showed us how to hold multiple perspectives in tension. She made people feel safe to talk about doubt.”

Rachel was generous with her platform.

In a competitive world of book contracts, speaking tours, podcasts, and celebrity endorsements, Rachel used her significant platform to amplify and encourage others. She not only took her well-deserved spot at the table of writing and teaching; she also pulled up countless more seats for others to sit next to her.

Today, [#becauseofRHE](#) is filled with stories of people whom Rachel encouraged in their callings to write and teach.

Notably, she amplified the voices of people who aren’t readily heard in traditional church communities: women, leaders of color, LGBTQ persons.

“Rachel held doors open she didn’t have to,” [wrote](#) Candice Marie Benbow. “She used her influence to help create opportunities for people she believed deserve[d] them.”

Even those she disagreed with, sometimes fiercely, she found a way to [engage](#) with grace and truth.

Of course, none of this accounts for her loving devotion to her family: her husband, Dan; her two young children, Henry and Harper; her parents, Peter and Robin; for all the close friends who knew her far more intimately than any of us can know on the other side of a laptop screen.

Theirs is a grief that most of us can’t fathom.

Yet from my limited view of the Christian landscape, I am struck by how *generative* Rachel’s work was: to think of how many writers would never have started putting pen to paper were it not for her courage, her chutzpah, her *eschet chayils!* along the way.

For many of us, she opened doors we never could have opened ourselves. The least we could do, in her honor, is to try to open a few more along the way.