



Jo Saxton

READY
TO
RISE



OWN *Your* VOICE,
GATHER *Your* COMMUNITY,
STEP INTO *Your* INFLUENCE

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*In loving memory of Lisa Michelle Ganske,
who had the most infectious laugh and was
a woman of grit, grace, and kindness.
We miss you.*

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Introduction

(A Seventh-Grade Girl Finds Her Voice and Speaks Truth to Power)

It's a broken world. I want to help fix it. I want to lead
the people who want to help fix it.

The school auditorium rippled with excitement. It was award night for the seventh graders. On the stage, more than a hundred honors students waited, familiar faces unfamiliarly dressed. In turns, they mocked and admired one another's outfits, chatting animatedly in an attempt to subdue their nerves and self-consciousness.

Across from the stage, the room was filled with their loved ones until it was standing room only. Proud parents, even prouder grandparents, and loved ones posed and positioned cameras and smartphones, while others greeted one another, celebrating their children's achievements or confirming car-pool arrangements and sports

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schedules. Younger siblings were being distracted by snacks or toys or the occasional tablet. The older ones entertained themselves with their own electronic devices, or they caught up with peers who'd also been brought along.

Meanwhile, the teaching staff milled around the auditorium, patiently trying to conduct sound checks on microphones and speakers that seemed to delight in jolting the audience with sudden and intrusively loud feedback. But then the principal took hold of a mic and cleared his throat to indicate the event was about to begin, and a hush fell over the room.

There were murmurs of surprise when the young woman's name was announced, because she hadn't told any of her friends that she was one of the two students selected to give a speech. Clutching her note cards, she made her way up to the podium and adjusted the microphone, perhaps because she felt it was the right thing to do.

She looked up and saw the number of people in the room and the anticipation on their faces. Spotting her parents, she exchanged a flickering glance with them and then determinedly looked down at her notes. She began speaking.

First, she thanked the families, parents, and teachers for both their presence and their contribution to her class's achievements. "This night belongs to you all," she said.

Then she spoke about her school journey—how she'd been shaped by experiences both positive and painful. She described the influence of teachers and friends who'd believed in her and encouraged her, thanking them for her growth. When she began speaking about harder times, she shared how difficult it had been to fill in a school survey that asked her to identify her ethnicity but didn't permit her to

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check more than one box. There just wasn't an option that reflected her biracial identity.

"I wondered why there wasn't a box for me," she said.

In fact, she'd called her mom in tears that day. "It's like I don't exist," she'd said, weeping.

Somehow, it was in this touch of vulnerability that her confidence seemed to grow. It was obvious the crowd was really warming to her, and she looked directly at the people in front of her. She indicated that she'd overcome her challenges by drawing strength from how her family had previously dealt with racially motivated incidents. She said that as she dreamed of the future, she didn't expect an easy or straightforward journey to achievement, but she wouldn't be deterred either.

"It's a broken world. I want to help fix it. I want to lead the people who want to help fix it."

After commending her peers and thanking parents and teachers again, she ended her speech to rapturous applause. There were many tear-stained but smiling faces in the audience.

She skipped back to her seat and to the company of her friends, and took a deep breath and smiled at me.

I didn't cry, but I *was* deeply moved. When she had used her seventh-grade mind and heart to speak truth to power, it wasn't just her confidence that had struck me, nor was it the tender vulnerability as she shared her story. Instead, it was the calm assumption with which she declared that she, that *we*, could play a role in changing a broken world. She simply believed that she, with everyone around her, had a contribution to make.

I leaned back into my chair, returned my daughter's smile, and thought, *That's my girl.*

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Women Who've Made a Difference

(And Why I Wasn't Sure I Was One)

The path to our destination is not always a straight one.
We go down the wrong road, we get lost, we turn back.
Maybe it doesn't matter which road we embark on.
Maybe what matters is that we embark.

—BARBARA HALL

I reflected on my daughter's speech—her moment—for months. The lens through which she saw the world and the resolve to do something about it reminded me of a time years before: Her younger sister (aged five at the time) called a family meeting to announce what she wanted to be when she grew up. She told us she would be running

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for president and her agenda would involve taking care of the environment and protecting marine life. (She has since moved on to other career choices.)

Naturally, I love the budding ideas and dreams and passions my kids—two daughters—have, particularly as they develop and mature and learn more about the world around them. But while their enthusiasm—and their innocence—moves me, it's the liberated audacity of their assumption that they have something to offer, that they have a contribution to make in those places in the world that they believe are broken.

This is the message they constantly see around them—the mantras that say they can be who they want to be, that they can change the world, and that they can live meaningful and purposeful lives by helping and serving people. And, yes, there's certainly a dose of idealism, but this message of empowerment is also conveyed in the books they read about women who've made a difference. They're inspired by the way they see leaders—who remind them a little, or a lot, of themselves—grace the global stage. I'll always remember the day when my eldest was a toddler and saw President Barack Obama on TV. She jumped up and down, shouting, "Mommy! His skin! He's just like me!"

Seeing people who look like them and hearing people share stories similar to theirs has catalyzed my children's understanding of their own potential and purpose. And this is true for other children, not just mine. There's a generation growing up that seems to already know that to live a life that makes a meaningful impact is not only necessary but part of our design. And although it is marvelous to watch these young people grow with such purpose behind them, they're not the first to

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know this—not the first generation, or, to bring it much closer to home, not the first in our family.

The journey each generation embarks upon as they discover their influence and potential has been widely varied, inevitably shaped by the times they were in. I've seen it over and over again, even in my own family. The generations of women who came before my daughters often discovered their purpose in ways they couldn't prepare for. Sometimes, their skills, callings, and leadership gifts were not so much discovered but uncovered as they faced challenging circumstances in a broken world. Their potential for impact was revealed as they stepped into uncharted territory in whatever way they hoped to build something different—for themselves, their families, their communities, and beyond.

My maternal grandmother grew up in Nigeria and lived to the rich age of one hundred and two before passing from this world to the next, leaving her legacy of a vibrant large family. I never got the chance to meet her, but I gained glimpses of her personality through the stories my family told about her. I learned she was kind and strong. She was also a very determined businesswoman, going to the market every week to sell and trade in the community. I was told my aunts and uncles actually had to persuade her to retire at the age of ninety-seven! Her husband, my grandfather, had passed away in the 1980s, so she'd been a widow for more than twenty years. Her resilience continued to carry her, even when death created a tomorrow that was unexpected.

My foster mother, Aunt May, lived in England through the tumultuous times of World War II. The pressure of war forced women into uncharted waters when they were called upon by the government to support the war effort. Because women were taking up roles

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previously occupied by men, their lives looked entirely different during the war. Women served in the armed forces, in agriculture, and in industry. They kept a nation moving during this dangerous period. When the Third Reich and its allies were defeated and the war was finally won, women shared in the victory (though it was decades before their contribution was given formal and public acknowledgment). Aunt May told me how much she hated modern-day films about women in that era. She felt it was romanticized, that their contribution was seen as frivolous. For her and her friends, it was anything but. What they did was in the bleak face of war, and it was work. They performed a vital service to their country.

When the war was over, women were thanked, but they were encouraged to return to their prewar lives and domestic roles. Hitler was dead, so it seemed that the grip of Nazism was extinguished (for the time being, at least). Men returning home from the war needed their jobs back.

But like any country affected by the devastation of war, the nation was not the same. It could never be. The men and the women were not the same. Including Aunt May. She had long decided she would never marry, so there was no plan for the typical domestic idyll for her. When the war effort was complete, drawing on her experiences looking after children evacuated from London, she decided to foster children. Who would have thought she'd find her life's purpose and vocation in the midst of war and tragedy? Or that she would be so influential in its aftermath?

Over the forty years that followed, she fostered more than a hundred children. I was one of the last to be fostered.¹ I like to think I was child number ninety-nine. When I came into her life, Aunt May was

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in her seventies, and like my grandmother, she, too, had to be persuaded to retire. Also like my grandmother, she passed away at the age of one hundred and two. Aunt May played her part in trying to fix a broken world during the war effort. Afterward, her life's mission was to nurture and raise the children who were wounded by it.

After the end of World War II and the attempt to resume prewar lives, it became clear that Britain had a significant labor shortage and needed immigration to boost the rebuild. The British Nationality Act of 1948 gave people from Commonwealth countries free entry to Britain,² so from the fifties and sixties onward, people from around the world responded to the invitation to work and rebuild. People traveled from the Caribbean, from India, and from countries in Africa, like Nigeria. And my family was among them. In the early sixties, my parents and others—who would become aunties and uncles—left Nigeria in pursuit of new adventures and opportunities.

They were young twentysomethings, visionaries in their own way, ready to build not only the nation but also new lives for themselves. Yet in spite of the law, immigrants were not always welcome. Sometimes they were deemed threats, seen as stealing jobs rather than contributing to the economy. Even though laws legislated against racial discrimination, it didn't stop it from happening. Therefore, these young immigrants gravitated toward people who understood them, who they felt safe around.

It was no wonder that as I grew older I was surrounded by a village of extended family members. Though not all of them were related by blood, they were fellow Nigerians (and some from the Caribbean) navigating a complex world together, understanding both one another's roots and the British soil on which they were now planted. In one

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another's presence, they felt more known and understood, less lonely. Isolation could leave them vulnerable.

A community was a source of both strength and support, just like back home, just like living in a village. After all, everyday life needed to continue. They needed to keep on going in and through the struggles. There was life to live, information to share about everything, such as paying bills, finding material and a seamstress for when traditional attire was needed, and where to buy hair products for Afro hair.

Furthermore, there was work to be done—retraining and fledgling careers to develop. There were resources to send to relatives overseas, a next generation to birth and raise. Whatever obstacles, whatever opportunities the world threw at them, they would face them together—and together achieve even more in the process.

Each generation of women discovered a path that led them to uncover and utilize their gifts, to use their voices in unanticipated ways in the world in which they lived. It was a path that led to opportunity, even when it didn't look that way at first. It wasn't easy for any of them. But when they engaged with the influence they now had, they made an impact on their world.

Unlike my youngest daughter, I didn't have political ambitions at age five. That year, Britain elected its first female prime minister, but I couldn't make the same assumptions my daughter had. I didn't see anyone who looked like me on Downing Street in the late 1970s and early 1980s, so I was still dreaming of superheroes. My notions of influence and service, though sincere and heartfelt, were still deeply embedded in the realm of fantasy. Surely I could dream . . .

Like the women who came before me, I found it wasn't easy to uncover the path to living into my potential for influence. I attended

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an all-girls secondary school where the message was you could be whoever you wanted to be. The staff strove to empower the young women there. They cited the advancements women made in politics and culture and said there was no reason we couldn't do the same in the future. It was finally our time.

And though I was inspired, I also saw a society replete with contradictions. My teachers didn't live where I lived. Was it time for everyone, or *just* men and women like them, with their connections and opportunities? Those years were marked by an uneasy social and cultural climate. Did this exciting new landscape include women of every class? Poor women? Did it apply to immigrant women and their children? I wasn't so sure when I saw glimpses of tabloid newspapers in which pundits screeched about immigrants stealing English people's jobs.

Then came the tumult in my own life experiences with long-term foster care, as well as everyday occurrences like puberty in all its dramatic fullness that left me uncertain of my worth and value. I swung between feeling inspired and feeling insecure in the same hour.

I also could not ignore that in its own way, a path was being uncovered. I often say I was the last to know I had gifts, skills, and a contribution to make. That I already had influence. My self-doubt obscured the significance of indicators, such as leading initiatives at school, captaining the sports team, and participating in fundraising opportunities at church. I remember a teacher deliberately and specifically (and publicly) telling me I had a voice. Perhaps sensing I would misinterpret her words because I was in the school choir, she clarified by saying, "Joannah, I mean you have a *perspective*, something to say that matters, and a leadership role within your class." Though I appreciated her words, I couldn't receive their meaning. I couldn't own it.

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It wasn't just my voice that was confusing me. As a Christian, I grew up hearing conflicting and contradictory and yet passionately held views on what a woman could and should be and what her area of influence was supposed to look like. By the time I reached college, sometimes those voices included very cute guys who had very strong opinions, who I was strongly drawn to for reasons *other* than their strong opinions.

The path leading toward influence, opportunity, and leadership began to open up through opportunities to work with the teenagers at my local church, then invitations to leadership roles and speaking opportunities on my college campus. *Something* was happening, but I still couldn't own it. I considered it something strange, even random, happening to me, even when I was enjoying the responsibility and opportunity.

I wasn't an influencer; I wasn't a leader. I was just someone who had strong opinions. People would sometimes wait for me to act upon shared opinions first and often sought my advice. *But I'm not a leader,* I reminded myself. *It just happens around me sometimes. I don't know why, but it's always been like this.*

In that era, I didn't see it as how God made me. I didn't see gifts. I didn't see influence. I didn't see that the path I was on was God-created, God-designed. I didn't see I was made for this. On a good day, I'd describe leadership as just the things I did. On a bad day, I saw it as a concession God made for a weird woman. On a very bad day, I feared something was fundamentally wrong with me, that I wasn't woman enough.

That I was too much.

That I wanted the wrong things in life.

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That I was the last person who should be given opportunity for influence.

I knew me. I knew that the brokenness of my past lingered in my life like a stale hangover. It left me with deep, quiet feelings of inadequacy that I worked hard to cover up—until I couldn't. I knew the cloud of sadness and pain would sometimes settle so heavily that I felt I was staring into an abyss. I also knew the vices I used to escape the way I felt. And knowing how quickly I swung between my insecurity and vanity, I also knew my ego and how I might feed it. Could I be trusted? *Should* I be trusted?

But sometimes I was inspired to make a difference in people's lives. Aunt May had. What if *I* could? I wanted to change the world, because where I grew up, it needed changing, needed investment. Yet at the same time, I felt disillusioned because I didn't see women who looked like me making an impact on their world. It was painfully rare in my environment. Some famous people loomed in the distance, and that was a blessing in its own way. But I needed to talk, to ask questions, to hear answers from women leaders. I needed to know how they wrestled with their own gifts and calls, or if they knew.

Battling with these things over many years felt lonely. If I really decided to commit to this path, wouldn't I just get lonelier? I knew how loneliness felt—palpably, physically—since childhood. I wouldn't choose that again. But surely I had to try to explore the stirrings inside me, the ideas in my head, and endeavor to put them to good use.

I kept moving forward because as I grew older, my faith was growing too. The more I encountered the power of Jesus in every fragment of my life, the more whole I became and the more I felt both grateful and compelled. I was grateful because Jesus was transforming me from

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the inside out—changing my perspective, healing my heart, challenging me. But I was compelled because knowing Him was life changing. I knew His good news was a life-giving, world-transforming change agent for the very fabric of society and all its systems and strata, as well as for the human heart.

**IF THERE WAS EVER A TIME TO *uncover* OUR
POTENTIAL AND VOICES—IT'S NOW. NOW IS
THE TIME TO BOLDLY AND AUTHENTICALLY
REPRESENT GOD'S GOODNESS IN THE
WORLD, LIVING AS CHANNELS FOR HIS
TRANSFORMATIVE CHANGE AND *power*.
NOW IS THE TIME TO RISE.**

There was no one moment for me when I suddenly felt confident about having gifts worth using or influence that could make a positive impact on the world around me. Instead, I discovered over time that I was made for this. That it wasn't only in my blood, in my DNA, from the women who made me and raised me but it was in the design of the God who created me. Who, before anything went wrong with the world, created men and women in His image and likeness with a two-fold purpose: (1) to have a living and active relationship with Him and (2) to boldly represent Him in the world.

That kind of purpose is worth pushing past my fears for, because if there was ever a time to uncover our potential and voices—it's now. Now is the time to boldly and authentically represent God's goodness

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in the world, living as channels for His transformative change and power.

Now is the time to rise.

CHANGING LANDSCAPES, SEISMIC SHIFTS, AND CULTURAL MOMENTS

We recently celebrated my mum's birthday at her favorite local restaurant. But as we drove around our old neighborhood, I was stunned by how much had changed. The grocery store and its parking lot had been replaced by stylish apartment blocks, and the huge flower market was about to be replaced by an embassy. New office buildings obscured the local library and my elementary school. The fish-and-chips shop no longer existed. The skyline, my skyline, was unrecognizable. Strangest of all, the roads were completely different from how they used to be, so I got lost and stuck in the neighborhood I'd lived in for most of my childhood and teenage years. Nothing was the same. It all seemed so sudden, so jarring.

In reality, our community had been changing for decades. The streets told a different story now. My mum had adjusted years ago, but I had to quickly recognize that the place I once knew was gone forever. I had to navigate "my" neighborhood in a new way.

We all find ourselves adjusting to new landscapes—not just the unexpected changing stories of our neighborhoods, but those of our personal lives. This could be a matriarch dealing with loss or ambitious young adults adjusting to life in a new country. Such upheaval can be chaotic and bewildering; it can also be transformative.

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We also encounter seismic shifts in society that redefine the world we're living in. Some, like a global war, leave wide cracks and fault lines in the planet, affecting generations to come. Other moments, such as life-changing medical discoveries, feel like breakthroughs. The way we function in society has been transformed by technological advances, political movements, domestic terrorism, the rise or decline of faith in a community, and the demise of once-trusted institutions resulting in economic crises. All these changes produce a profoundly new cultural backdrop, an unrecognizable skyline. It can be frightening and painful in some instances, creative and innovative in others. But it's always disorienting, and it requires we learn how to navigate unexpected paths.

As women explore these uncharted paths, we're seeing more of their influence and leadership emerge as their voices, their stories, their contribution impact their world. This is not the first time, as women have been influencing history throughout time. Still, women are emerging in new influential ways across the cultural landscape. We sense the shift as women organize marches, mobilizing their communities to press for lasting social and cultural change as they activate grassroots movements. We hear it in the rise and strength and influence of the #MeToo and Time's Up movements, addressing long-ignored experiences of sexual assault and power abuses that have shattered women's lives. We note the shift through the leadership presence and influence of women in the political sphere and their pursuit of the highest levels of political office on the global stage.

In the US, the surge of women in the workforce in recent years has redefined the marketplace. According to the US Department of Labor report, women account for 47 percent of the workforce and own up to ten million businesses, resulting in \$1.4 trillion in receipts. It was

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found that “mothers are the primary or sole earners for 40 percent of households with children under 18 today, compared with 11 percent in 1960.”³ The workforce is being reenvisioned as women’s voices lead conversations about pay equality and parental leave.

Alongside this are the conflicting journalistic think pieces debating a woman’s place in society, how loud a woman’s voice can be, whether it’s loud enough. Voices ready to charge into a great unknown, facing off against voices who call for a return to a former, more familiar landscape—complete with its own distinct cultural expectations. The cacophony grows louder, but noise never stopped an earthquake; if anything, it might help intensify it. The skyline remains changed, and there are still new paths to explore.

It might be disorienting, but what if this were also an opportunity? What if our cultural moments uncovered a new path for our God-given design and call—a redeeming God who promised He would be doing a new thing and making all things new? Rather than being afraid of a shifting culture, we might discover new purpose there. That instead of hiding away in safe enclaves, we realize this is an opportunity to rise.

What if God gives us a vision for a new skyline? What if this were a window in time where we needed people to discover that their paths are bigger than themselves (and their own lives) and that they are invited to rise up and respond?

We need people who, rising into their influence, will demolish the institutionalization of ideologies that have broken communities and destroyed lives. We need people who will not only clear the rubble of old ideologies and mind-sets but also tend to those who have been broken and damaged by them. We need people who will uncover

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voices and gifts that respond to injustice and dehumanization, misogyny and racism, and ableism and every ism and phobia out there.

And we need people who will voice new dreams—new culture-shaping, community-healing, justice-and-mercy-living, potential-realizing, life-giving, God-inspired dreams. People who would be willing to play their parts and lead the way. Further still, we need to bring new ideas and see and act on the potential that a new landscape can bring. We need to create new ways of being, of living and doing.

We're making our own chapter of history, and the world needs your faith-fueled voice, gifts, and skills. It needs you to rise into your God-given influence and make a positive impact. So you need to clear the debris and the obstacles standing in the way of unapologetically living the life you were made for. You'll need to dig deep to get there, and it might be a little uncomfortable at times, but it will be worth it.

Grace and peace to you as you continue in this book.

REVIEW AND REFLECT

Think of the women in your family tree—their stories and experiences. What limits and opportunities did they face, and how did they shape their lives and legacy?

Consider the limits and opportunities in your story. How have they shaped your life? How has your world changed in unexpected ways? Where has it been challenging? Where has it been transformative?

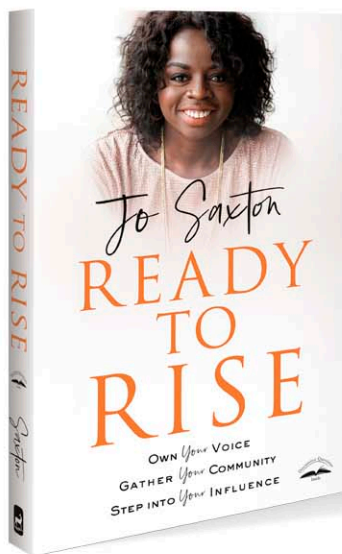
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