

KENDALL VANDERSLICE: BY BREAD ALONE

FEBRUARY 7, 2023

0:00 Hello everyone and welcome to the Women's Scholars and Professionals podcast.

0:05 My name is Ann Boyd and I'll be your host.

0:13 We at women's scholars and professionals are here to support women in their God given callings into the university and beyond.

0:21 So if you're a graduate student or a faculty member and administrator or a student and professional school, a scholar in between jobs or simply a person who supports women in the academic world, then this podcast is for you today.

0:39 I'm excited to share a conversation with Kendall Vanderslice, a professional baker, practical theologian and author of *By bread alone*.

0:50 A baker's reflections on hunger, longing and the goodness of God.

0:56 This is Kendall's second time on the podcast and I was thrilled to catch up with her and dig into her new book *by bread alone* is part memoir, part spiritual reflection, with lots of incredible stories and a handful of recipes thrown in for good measure.

1:15 Kendall's story is riveting as she shares deeply about her childhood, her struggle with disordered eating and food sensitivities, her search for vocation and her experience as a single woman, cultivating a strong community Kendall guides the reader gently into spiritual truths as she reflects on the presence of God through times of joy and struggle.

1:40 I really enjoyed the book and I was grateful for Kendall's openness as I asked her lots of probing questions in this interview.

1:48 So let me tell you a little bit more about her Kendall.

1:52 Vanderslice is a baker writer and speaker as well as the founder of the edible theology project, a ministry that connects the communion table to the kitchen table.

2:04 She is a graduate of Wheaton College, Boston University and Duke Divinity School, Kendall lives in Durham north Carolina with her big eared beagle named Strudel, where she teaches workshops on bread baking as a spiritual practice.

2:22 So let's dive right in.

2:24 We're so glad you're here with us.

2:28 It's been just about a year since our last conversation at the well and I'm so glad to talk with you again and you have published a new book since we last talked.

2:38 And it's a memoir entitled *By Bread Alone*, a baker's reflections on hunger, longing and the goodness of God.

2:47 And I really loved reading it.

2:49 It is such a beautiful and courageous book.

2:53 You really invite the reader into your world and open up your life for all of us to share.

2:59 So I'm just wondering what was it like for you to write this memoir?

3:02 It's so vulnerable.

3:04 Yeah, this, this one was a long time in process.

3:10I think I knew for a long time I wanted to write a book that was kind of on theology of bread.

3:15but the memoir aspect was quite unexpected.

3:18and I I started I wrote an essay in a class that I took in graduate school of Theology and the arts class, that started to get at some of these topics and I realized that kind of the autobiographical side was my sort of way into some of the theological components.

3:38and then I took a spiritual autobiography class and that's where this really kind of began.

3:42I wrote a full a longer essay and began to see kind of how these themes of my life connected and connected to my experience of bread.

3:50And so that was like four years ago I think, and I I had already been thinking about kind of the larger structure of this book and then that's when I realized, oh, I think this is memoir.

4:03and then it's just been a long time Writing and re thinking and writing and re thinking.

4:09you know, I started it.

4:11I wrote the proposal for this book in kind of the end of 2019 and then started like ready to pitch it around in the beginning of 2020.

4:20And then Covid hit and I realized, you know, this is a book about like bread and loneliness and suddenly everyone is isolated and everyone's baking bread and I think I need to stand back and observe for a little while before I keep writing.

4:33and then of course in the end, my experience of the pandemic, utterly shaped kind of how this book took form as well.

4:39So yeah, well, yeah, yeah, you integrate all of that.

4:42I mean, you get into Covid and the way people responded by baking bread and the themes of bread and bread baking and the miracle and kind of magic that happens even just with with the chemical composition of bread, it all comes through so beautifully in your book.

5:01Oh thank you, thank you.

5:03Well, I really I want to dive in and I just want to kind of ask permission first because I'm going to get into some really serious and intense topics right away.

5:13Are you ready for that?

5:14I'm ready.

5:15Let's go.

5:15Okay.

5:16Okay.

5:16Super.

5:17So your story begins with your own childhood as you describe your family context and your experience in ballet dance that all sort of add up to a pretty complicated narrative of christian faith and food restrictions and body image.

5:35And I just remember there was one scene where I just found myself standing kind of open mouth after reading it, where your dance instructor assures your parents that you

were too smart to give into the temptation of disordered eating after the you know, they connected you with the nutritionist who put you on a very strict diet in your teenage years.

5:56And I just wanted to bring this up because I know for most women in the U.

6:00S.

6:00It's hard to avoid issues around body image and food.

6:03And I'm wondering what lessons have you learned from this experience?

6:08Yeah, I mean I think so much of my work now ties back to understanding food as a gift from God and understanding food as something that we are meant to take delight in and that through food we are able to take delight in our relationship with God, and I think arriving to this sort of place of this relationship to food for me now has taken years and years of healing from my years of disordered eating, but I've also found that when we begin out of this place, a food is a gift and food is a source of delight, then it reframes kind of everything else.

6:49I you know, I think a lot of people are scared that if I treat food as the source of delight, that it becomes like something that you're just gonna endlessly indulge in, almost like it's dangerous to find pleasure and joy and food, but I actually think it's the opposite that when we understand food is a gift from God and something that we're meant to find joy in, then we pay more attention to the foods that we eat and the ways that our body responds to them.

7:15and out of that we're able to have this I think kind of reordered relationship to food that allows us to to have a healthy relationship both to our bodies and to food mentally, and also physically.

7:29Yeah, I mean, what it makes me think of what you're saying is I've been reading about how mindful eating mindfulness, eating just that, and I can see how opposite that is from my own in my own personal life, you know, I'm I'm running from place to place and I'll, you know, just have to grab something to eat or I'm feeling uncomfortable and so I stuff some cookies when we treat food as fuel as just like kind of the thing that keeps us going, it really disconnects us from well it disconnects us from kind of the value of food, the joy of food, the stories kind of embedded in the foods that we eat, but it also almost puts us in opposition to food that like we treat it as, you know, it's just this utilitarian thing and also it's something that we have to fight against almost like you know, we were, you know, worried about like, well treating food as fuel almost takes away the ability to treat it as gift and pleasure, because if it's solely meant to keep us going, then why would we waste our time or our money or, you know, calories on delicious things?

8:40And that's just I think a anemic way of relating to food well, and that that connects to with your the next question where I wanted to talk about some experiences you had, where you believe that something was going to happen and then something else came up.

9:00So it's really experiences of failure where you thought your journey was heading in one way, but it ended up turning out differently and I'm curious to know your thoughts on those moments of redirection as you look at them from this vantage point.

9:15You know, I see this in from your childhood and your, your experience believing that you wanted to go into ballet and then you had a college, experience where you were, you refused admission, things like that.

9:29 Yeah, yeah.

9:30 I am in looking back, I see sort of my journey to where I am now is this very circuitous journey of in in many ways, I see kind of the points of connection and the continuity from childhood through now of the ways that I think God has been sort of shaping and directing my path.

9:48 but also there are so many points where it just didn't make sense in the moment.

9:52 And I think so much of this book is really about kind of our relationship to control.

9:58 that, you know, our relationship to food is often, something about wrestling with control.

10:02 Our relationship with faith is oftentimes kind of this, wrestling with control.

10:06 Our relationship to our bodies is oftentimes kind of wrapped up in this wrestling for control.

10:11 And, I think kind of, my own story of seeing God's continual redirection is kind of this challenging against that desire for control.

10:21, that God has been constantly asking me to give up that control and to trust trust the direction that God is leading.

10:28 And sometimes, sometimes it is where I think God is leading and sometimes it's nothing like where I think God is leading, but I can always look back and see sort of those, those through lines of, oh God has been sort of with me along the way and God has been guiding these steps but in the moments when I keep trying to take back control, it's where where things go awry.

10:50 Yeah, that that is so relatable and I mean it connects with I also wanted to ask about calling and because we talked about this a little bit last year, but as you say, you know, your your journey, it's so fascinating to discern your you have this winding path throughout the book of where you end up, you know, ending in graduate school, you didn't, I think you were going to go to college, but you ended up in graduate school and then you're in the life as an entrepreneur and in the end it just seems like some place where you're really completely aligned with some of your deepest childhood experiences and passions and also it's really unexpected and I'm wondering how have you seen the way that failure and calling sort of shape and inform one another?

11:41 Yeah, I mean I think that that failure is kind of the point of redirection but also the point of kind of rethinking in many ways, you know there's no like the work I'm doing now, there's no path, direct path to it, there's no like I never could have imagined sort of the career that I have, because there was no example of it.

12:02 And so, there was no way to kind of chart a course and follow it to get here.

12:08 It required sort of this constant redirection.

12:11 And I think those points of failure are the points where I see God most clearly stepping in and sort of reorienting.

12:17 And my mom recently I gave her an early copy of this book and allowed her to read it through before it was published.

12:25 And so she read it, she's read it a couple times now and she keeps telling me like, I wish I had known, you know what your experience was, you know, in elementary school, in

high school, I wish you could have communicated then what you're experiencing and I could have, you know, protected you from it.

12:39And I have to keep reminding her like, there's there's, first off, I couldn't have articulated when I was experienced in high school when I was in high school.

12:48It's, you know, 20 years later that I can now say this is what I was experiencing at that point.

12:52But but also, I think I I wouldn't give up those points of, you know, those, those points of loss because they also, I see what what was gained through them.

13:04And it was a very strange, you know, it's a very, I wrote the book of this book and kind of a four month span, which is a very short amount of time to write a manuscript of this length.

13:15And so it was kind of for four months, just like sitting really intensely in these stories over the last, you know, three decades.

13:22And it was a very strange experience to sit in kind of many of those points that felt like failure in the moment and now to see how they were such vital pivot points that got me to where I am now, wow.

13:35Yeah, I mean, it's the it reminds me of improvisation in music, that there's that you just always kind of have to roll with it.

13:44Yeah, I mean, how do you, I don't know.

13:47I think that we have a lot of listeners who might be at points like that.

13:51What advice would you give them about how to, how to lean into that, how to roll with those improvisational moments.

13:58I mean, I think stay open to the paths that God might open up for you, but also stay open to really creative sort of ways that thinking creatively about how God might be directing your calling, that it might not look like you.

14:15You know, think it would look that for me, like, I I knew, you know, when I was in high school, I thought I would never go on to college, I had no desire to go into academic spaces.

14:23And then I spent, you know, better part of more than a decade in in multiple graduate programs and realized in that time that I absolutely love, you know graduate work and absolutely love research and being in academia and then also unexpectedly, I feel like God has called me out of that or you know keeping a foot in that in that world, but in a creative way and that's been really there were moments when it was terrifying because it did not look again like the path before me like I could have charted out, but now I love the way that there is a creative way to pull together kind of these different sides of myself and see this calling shaped through like the value of kind of these academic spaces and the value of these, you know, food spaces and and these different worlds that seem to not have anything to do with one another and now being able to see them converge in a really exciting way that I think builds on my scholarship even more than it ever could have if I was purely in an academic space.

15:27But I think that kind of sort of creative way of seeing these pieces put together is never something I could have imagined for myself and I think yeah, remaining open to to seeing God offer creative pass forward is is worth it.

15:44 Yeah, yeah, and you can see that in your story, it's so beautiful how it all comes together.

15:50 Well I want to move on to another weighty topic and that is grief.

15:57 I hear your experience of grief and loss on so many levels through your writing from friendship challenges that you have in your childhood to the death of a friend when you're a young adult, and it reminds me of Isaiah 53, Jesus, you know, that, that he's acquainted with grief, and it's like, Kendall is acquainted with grief.

16:17 So, tell me how grief has impacted your life.

16:23 you know, in many ways, I I don't necessarily think that it has impacted me any more than the average person.

16:31 but I do think that in writing this book, I was able to look back and see the ways that it has shaped me and impacted me and my hope in writing through these experiences of grief was that it would allow other people to also identify, kind of, the points of grief in their own life and the ways that those have shaped them and shaped especially their relationship to God and their relationship to community.

16:55 but for me, those yeah, those those moments of of profound grief and loss were distinctly tied to, kind of friendships and community and the loss of friendships and community, and at the same time, those are the moments when I see friends and communities stepping in and and being with me in the ways that I most needed in in the most profound ways.

17:24 And I think that has really informed how I view community and how I attempt to live in community and view view friendship as you know, the the incredibly valuable role that we play in one another's lives, and that we can't take that lightly.

17:45 and we can't take that for granted that that we were created to need one another, and we are more fully ourselves when we are living our lives in close relationship with with others.

17:57 Yeah, and I mean that that comes through really clearly in your in your writing and specifically in your experience of singleness, which you talk about quite a bit, and I really appreciated the way you take us on the journey of singleness with you and you refuse to tidy it up by dismissing your longing, saying, oh, I don't really need that, but instead you really show us the way you've incorporated that unfulfilled an active desire into your life.

18:26 And I know we have many listeners in a similar place, so, I'd love to hear what does it look like for you to live with this longing.

18:35 Yeah.

18:36 You know, I think I for a while I thought that this was going to be a book on bread and singleness.

18:42 and as I got deeper in it, I realized that I didn't want to write a book on singleness, but I any book that I wrote that was memoir driven my experience of singleness would inevitably inform it.

18:55 and as it became more and more a book about community and about loneliness and longing, I realized that the ways that I experienced loneliness and unmet longing is most profoundly through my experience of singleness, and also that is not a feeling that is unique to people who are single.

19:14 and so I my goal in writing this book was to kind of give an example of how I have seen these things at play, but also hopefully create this space, so that others who have experienced loneliness or and that longing in other ways, whether that is, you know, childlessness or, you know, an infertility, as is the story of several of my friends who are in the book, or whether that is, you know, through a lack of a place that is home or you know, that other people would be able to to resonate with the ways that they've also experienced loneliness, but but I do think that there is you know, a unique gift in my experience of singleness that has allowed me to better understand kind of how to live in community that for me, it really sort of looking back towards this passage in genesis when God says, you know, God creates the first human and calls all of these things good and then says, you know, it's not good for when for a human to be alone and God creates a partner for adam and oftentimes we look to that passage as kind of this image or like to point to the goodness of marriage, that marriage is kind of this thing that God has given us in in response to our need to be in community.

20:30 and I think that that is, well, that's certainly there, I think it's sort of incomplete reading of that passage that actually what I think God is saying is we need community and we need to exist in community.

20:42 And I think that actually it's in the Eucharist that we when we make this kind of commitment to the community that we're in, that God meets our need for for for community, God intends to address our our loneliness and our longing that certainly some of that can be addressed in marriage, and also I know a lot of deeply lonely married people and you know, whether you're married or single, we all have this need for community and this ability to live in community, and when we live our lives sort of in close relationship with one another, sharing, able to share our moments of joy and our moments of grief and our moments of loss.

21:26 I think that that we can hold on to one another's longing, an unfulfilled longing in a way that doesn't, again doesn't fully meet that need, but also helps meet some of the needs underneath it, if that makes sense.

21:45 I think what took me a long time to realize was that my, you know, I think everyone's experience of singleness is very different and for folks for whom it hurts, it hurts for different reasons for some people, it might be because of rejection for others, it might be because of loneliness for others, it might be, you know, because of having witnessed really unhealthy marriages in childhood and not quite knowing sort of what how to hope for something good.

22:13 And I think everyone's experience is so different.

22:17 but when we start to probe sort of what's underneath them, I realized for me the pain underneath, it was largely just this this desire to share life with someone else.

22:28 And I have found that actually that can be done in friendship, that that doesn't necessarily have to be done in, you know, in partnership with a spouse.

22:38 And it was really, it was really terrifying to come to that realization to almost let go of this thing that I had assumed was and goal and realized actually kind of underneath it, I have these deeper needs that our God given needs and there are other ways in which God can meet these needs, and of course, this desire for marriage and desire for family is still there.

22:59but also it doesn't have quite the hold or the sharpness to it, that I think it did in other points because I do actually have deep friendships, close friendships that that you know, care for one another in these moments.

23:15The friends who always will, you know, be the ride to the airport or I will drive them to the airport or the ones who like, you know, you need to go pick up a piece of furniture, I need a second person, like they'll always be the one to answer the phone or the ones who will come over and you know, just you know, we'll we'll merge what's in our fridges and and have meals together on a regular basis that those kinds of relationships actually meet that need for companionship and for for kind of the presence of another person in a way that that doesn't necessarily look, again, it's another sort of creative way that God is that God is meeting these needs.

23:50But you know, it doesn't necessarily look like what I would have imagined because it's not the model that I that I had been given, but also it is really beautiful and really good.

24:00Yeah, I mean, I think the the part from your book that is coming to mind, I think you have an experience, I can't remember exactly what it what it was, but you had to make a decision and you said I'm so tired of making the decisions all by myself, but then you're surrounded by friends who really support you as you journey and it is really beautiful.

24:24Yeah, I mean it's a reminder that we don't we don't now we're not really doing anything alone, even if it seems like we're doing it alone.

24:33Well, I want to also want to talk about the way that your your book is filled with theological reflections on bread and baking.

24:42It is just it's it's woven through the entire narrative.

24:47You start with some very rich history in the preface that we could talk about for a long time.

24:53And then you also incorporate lots of stories and history throughout the book.

24:57And I just wanted to zoom in on one story that I'd love for you to talk about the story of Sor juana ines de la Cruz.

25:06Yes, and you talk about that at the start of chapter six.

25:09So can you tell us that story and what it has meant to you?

25:12Yes.

25:12I love so Sor juana is writing has really kind of shaped a lot of my theological work.

25:18She was a mexican none in the 17th century, I believe, early 17th century.

25:25and she was an academic at heart.

25:29She was a scholar.

25:30She you know, wanted to, she read broadly and wrote broadly, but also she, her sort of theological writing was a challenge to her.

25:41It was challenging to her bishop and her confessor.

25:45and so she was kind of discouraged from her academic work and encouraged to do more of, kind of the domestic work that was common among her, you know, her fellow sisters.

25:55and at one point, she she kept writing these sort of theological challenges to to the church.

26:02And so at one point, she was essentially, like her books were taken away from her and she was told that she couldn't do this anymore.

26:08And she was she wrote it's called or the response is kind of a risk to the theological challenges of her bishop and confessor.

26:16And in it, she writes, if Aristotle would have cooked, he would have written a good deal more.

26:22and I just love this again, this like her entire sort of life shows that this domestic work and this academic work go hand in hand, that her thinking is informed by the work of her hands, and the work of her hands is informed by her thinking.

26:37and I think you see this at play most in one particular play that she wrote.

26:42it's an allegorical play, it's actually it's not even the full play, it's the preface, like an allegorical preface to a larger play that she wrote, that it is so it's called the Loa to Divine Narcissus.

26:54and it was meant to be performed in front of the spanish court.

26:59And essentially in this play.

27:02it is, there are two characters who are the, I think their their names are religion and something else, I can't remember, but they're they're kind of the, the Spaniards arriving in the Americas and then there are these two characters that are the indigenous americans.

27:19and in the story the Spaniards come and they observe these, you know they come and they, they tell the americans, the indigenous people about the bread, about christ as the bread.

27:35And the indigenous americans recognize their God in this bread and they call it the great god of the seeds.

27:41you know, so they say like you know who gives himself as food so that we can we can be filled and so in this story you see these indigenous americans recognizing the god that they already know in the bread that the Spaniards offered to them and to them it's this kind of realization of, we have already known God because we've known the god that has offered himself to us as bread and when you offer us the bread we now have the name to sort of give to this god that we both, we both recognize.

28:10and one of the sort of religion characters sees that and embraces that and is excited about that and it kind of becomes the launching point of conversation and the other gets deeply angry and is saying like no your God is the wrong god, we have the right god.

28:25and this was like a play that was meant to challenge the the catholic church and the and the ways that they were you know, understanding the kind of role of religion and Christianity in the new world, but I think that this is just a brilliant picture of the way that sort of wanda's mind works and the ways that it was again shaped by this relationship between domestic work and academic work, this realization that, you know, it was there domestic work, the making of bread and the eating of bread, and that the deep relationship to bread that helped them know that God was already present with them through this bread, and then when they were offered God as bread to be able to say this is the God that we already know.

29:10but also that was incredibly challenging in spaces that privileged kind of just this academic approach to theology, this idea that, you know, it's about having the right language and words to put to it, that it couldn't be something that we know first in our bellies and on our tongues through this bread that we eat, but it's got to be something we know first in our minds.

29:28And I just love the way that her her plate challenges that to say, like, actually bread is this thing that God has given us and and we know God in bread and perhaps we know God through bread before we even have a name or a history or a story or a deeper understanding to put to it.

29:48It's such a beautiful story and I think it it makes so much sense to think about it today.

29:54I mean since the pandemic, there's been so much more of an awareness of the importance of labor and domestic work and the way that domestic work undergirds everything we do and that there is a connectedness and a spirituality and a thoughtfulness and even an intellectual rigor about ways to manage all of these things.

30:21Yeah, yeah, absolutely.

30:23And you know, I think, yeah, understanding that those things are not just kind of the the under grading work that's necessary for something else to get done, but it actually can shape our work and that, you know, maybe our academic work is lacking if it doesn't engage and understand with this very sort of practical tactile domestic work as well.

30:44you know, it's it's a challenge to accept that because we don't, you know, we see kind of the more the more basic work as almost what's the word, like inferior to the more sort of thoughtful mind work.

31:00but I actually think that the two of them are informed one another in really important ways.

31:10Well, this has been so fascinating and as we wrap up, I really want to make sure that our listeners know what's on the horizon for you and how to stay connected with you.

31:20Yeah, so I ran an organization called the edible theology Project.

31:25and so the edible theology project, we use storytelling about food to facilitate conversations about the topics that shape our lives.

31:33and so we have a curriculum that we're currently working to get in churches called worship at the table.

31:39It's a small group of sunday school curriculum that helps helps folks in churches to have sort of these similar conversations to see the ways that food has shaped their experience of the world and there experience of faith and to find healing in their relationship to food and community.

31:55And so my hope is that folks will read by bread alone and that they'll be able to sort of see the story of how God has worked through food and community in my own life and that this curriculum will help them to then sort of interrogate how God has done that in their lives and how they might be able to shape community so that they can experience God in that way.

32:17As well As Kendall tells her own story in her book she highlights wide ranging truths that make it easy to recognize yourself in the narrative along the way.

32:31 It's a delightful read and I hope you can pick up a copy, you can preorder it now for release on 28 February 2023 and if you listen to the end of the credits, you'll hear a little bonus from our interview in which Kendall offers her candid thoughts on the low carb movement, the women's scholars and professionals podcast is hosted by me and Boyd and is a production of intervarsity, christian fellowship.

33:00 We acknowledge that the opinions of our guests may not necessarily represent the ministry doctrine or policies of in traverse City.

33:08 You can find more information about our podcast than the other cool things we are doing at the well dot intervarsity dot org.

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33:38 And as we close listen in to this excerpt from my interview with Kendall.

33:44 Yes, I'm a fan of anyone who wants to rethink the anti carb status.

33:49 I mean, you know, bread has been the core of the human diet for most humans throughout most of history.

33:55 And so for me, a lot of kind of my beginning to think theologically about bread came out of this experience of disordered eating and restrictive dieting and I hit this point where I sort of had this question of like if God, if God offer, you know, makes bread this kind of central imagery throughout the story of scripture and offers bread to us as kind of the core of worship and it's been the core of the human diet for most of human history, I just cannot theologically believe that it is bad.

34:25 and that was kind of the initiating question that sparked both my kind of my work in Food Studies and more kind of the anthropological historical side of things, but also my work in theology to say, you know, how how can we understand the the role that bread out to play in our lives if God has made it so central, like it can't be something bad, right?

34:48 but then we do have these like, kind of questions this wrestling with like, but also bread is actively harmful for some people and we see that, you know, experienced right now, and I think it always comes back to this, like seeing that again, food was created as good and we live in a broken world and our experience of it is broken, and but also food is this ongoing sort of picture of God's of God's redemption of creation.

35:12 And anyway, so I'm always a fan of challenging the, the anti bread narrative while also holding onto that recognition of, like, some people do deeply experience the Brokenness of the world and their relationship to bread right now



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