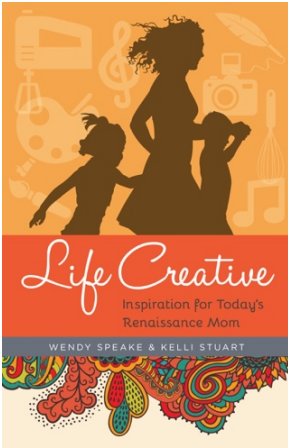


An interview with Wendy Speake and Kelli Stuart, authors of *Life Creative: Inspiration for Today's Renaissance Mom*

Creative moms often feel as though they must lay their passions down once the kids arrive, if for no other reason than there is no time. But God has something special in mind for creative women during this intense season of mothering. In *Life Creative: Inspiration for Today's Renaissance Mom* (Kregel Publications/September 27, 2016) authors Wendy Speake and Kelli Stuart show that “a mother’s natural bent toward imagination doesn’t just wither and die with the birth of a child. This core component remains part of her intricate design.”



Q: What brought the two of you together to write *Life Creative*?

Kelli Stuart: Our story really begins back in 2001. We were both newly married, living in Texas and pursuing careers in the arts. We spent many hours sitting together, dreaming up ways we could partner together in each of our unique creative giftings. Wendy was an actress and writer, and I was a budding novelist and worship leader. We loved spurring each other on in these creative pursuits.

But then life happened. Each of us moved to another state and both were soon expecting our first babies. Between 2003 and 2010, our conversations shifted from art and creativity to motherhood, potty training and the exhaustion of raising small children.

In 2011, we gathered a few of our creative friends together in Northern California for an extended weekend of writing and photography and cooking. We were ready to start working again and needed to create a space in which to do it. For the next five years, we gathered with the same intimate group of women and dared to reawaken the long-sleeping, dormant, deeply creative parts of our lives once again.

It was around the table at those creative retreats the idea for *Life Creative* was born. We wanted to encourage other moms to embrace their God-given gifts, but we also wanted to help them see the beauty in the messy, mundane moments of motherhood. Blending these two seemingly separate parts of our lives together, the art of motherhood and liberal arts we once pursued is the pivotal point of *Life Creative*.

Q: *Life Creative* is a book written to encourage moms, but it is not your average parenting book on raising kids. Tell us about your new book and how its message is different.

KS: It's not a how-to, self-help book about raising children, but rather a love letter to artistic mothers. We begin by calling attention to the unique renaissance of art exploding in the world today, fueled in great part by artistic mothers and social media. In this Pinterest age of handcrafted children's parties, Instagram photos of beautifully decorated homes and blogs filled with poetry and prose, clearly we are in the midst of a brand new artistic renaissance — not one born in Italian cathedrals or Harlem jazz clubs, but rather in kitchens, nurseries and living rooms around the world.

We answer the question, “What was God thinking when He created me creative and then gave me children?” Creative moms often feel as though they must lay their passions down. God had something special in mind for the creative woman during this intense season of mothering.

Wendy Speake: This is a book for moms, written by moms and including the stories of other moms. We're all on a journey to embrace our God-given, creative design in the midst of motherhood! There are, however, some practical pieces of parenting advice tucked in between the stories about setting boundaries around sacred family gatherings, praying for wisdom and discernment and how to include your family in your business of art in the busyness of motherhood.

Q: Why do you think a woman feels like she must give up some of her own interests when she becomes a parent?

WS: It's simple math really. There are only 24 hours in a day, and children fill up nearly all those little minutes. The leftover spaces are few and far between, and when they present themselves there's another pull: simple self-

care! Most moms would also like to lose that baby weight by walking on the elliptical machine out in the garage, and a shower would be a delightful extravagance as well! Such small space is left over for a woman to indulge in the passions that once fueled her days. For the majority of creative women who become mothers, there are few afternoons at her easel; dinner parties with multiple courses are exchanged for simple suppers feeding baby as her own food gets cold, and slipping out the door to rehearse with the worship band at church requires all the planets aligning.

KS: We begin the book by acknowledging the tug-of-war that happens in an artistic mother's heart when she gives birth to children. Suddenly her attention is divided, and when the children are very small they take up a lot of mental and emotional energy. Art is naturally pushed aside during this season, and this is a sacrifice many mothers make willingly. But God never intended for us to sacrifice our unique gifts on the altar of motherhood. Though the creativity and art may need to be set aside for a time, we believe when the slivers of a creative mother's days begin to lengthen, she'll find the art is there waiting. It may look different — in fact, it likely will be different! Motherhood changes the creative woman, but the miracle of this metamorphosis is the art transforms *with* the mother. What once looked like opera and poetry pre-children comes out of her life today as home-decorating and party-throwing, or any number of beautiful displays of her creative self.



Q: As a new mom, did you feel like you needed to rein in your own creativity? If so, was it from expectations you put on yourself or was it a pressure you felt from society?

KS: I don't know that I felt pressure from society so much as I just couldn't figure out how to fit the art back in. Where once the moments of my day were entirely at my disposal, now I was at the beck and call of a tiny human being. At first I thought I had missed the boat, that I should have built a better career for myself before I had children. But as my children grew, I found I could still indulge in the creative parts of myself. It would just look different. I like the different.

WS: I find it ironic the last acting job I booked before conceiving my first child was playing a pregnant woman going into labor. It was an AT&T commercial. I don't recall all of the details of the commercial, but looking back it seems like a profound send-off. I haven't had a traditional acting audition since birthing that baby boy. However, something quite profound happened in the early days of motherhood for me. Just after my son was born I made 100 handcrafted birth announcements and stamped his little feet 100 on the cover of each one. I decorated his nursery with the most beautiful Hawaiian print baby bedding I'd ever seen. What I realized as I nursed my baby in that room, rocking and singing, was I wasn't an actress as much as I was a creative woman who acted. Therefore, when the acting stopped, the creativity had to find another channel in which to flow out of my life.

Now that my children are a bit older, I am actually acting again. However, it looks different. Some moms I know are able to do more than I am. Some have flourishing creative businesses or creative ministries, but I'm only accountable to be the woman that God made me to be — as a wife, as a mother, and as an artist.

Q: Often young mothers tend to feel reprimanded for dreaming dreams outside the home. What advice can you give them?

KS: There is absolutely nothing wrong with dreaming! Our children need to see mom chasing after her dreams. I worked on my novel for 10 years, all of it with growing children by my side. I let them see the process, and I made sure they understood what I was working for. I got up in the wee hours of the morning to work because I had a dream I wasn't willing to sacrifice. And when the box of books arrived, my oldest was there to help me open them. He'd been there through the entire process, and that moment with him was one of my proudest mothering moments because he saw the reward of all the sacrifice and work.

As mothers, it is second nature to cheer our children on toward their dreams. We do it with our husbands too. But we tend to tuck our dreams aside, afraid to define them or offer parameters to our hopes outside of motherhood. What Wendy and I found in talking to the many women featured in *Life Creative*, however, is when we're willing to embrace our own dreams and to bring our husbands and children into the journey, a unique blend of life and art starts to come together. It's beautiful and messy, and it looks different for every woman and every family. This book offers many examples of women who are walking the tightrope of motherhood and creativity.

Q: In the age of Pinterest and Instagram, it seems as though there's a lot of pressure on mothers to be creative. Is that a new trend born from social media?

KS: Absolutely, and for some women the stress is real! They feel it when throwing birthday parties for their children, or when it's their turn to bring refreshments to a Sunday School class. Others feel like losers on Facebook because they don't think of themselves as articulate, or they're embarrassed their picture of their children on Easter Sunday is less than share-worthy because the family's outfits didn't match, the baby's hair looked like a rat's nest and the middle child never looks at the camera. Oh, the shame!

But creativity isn't doing things like every other pinning, uploading, Etsy-selling woman is doing! Creativity is being exactly who God created you to be! I love that. Our creativity is simply us being who He created! Picking up pre-made cupcakes from the grocery store can feel like you're admitting defeat before you even try to whisk up some simple ingredients. But if God made you an extraverted singer, then embrace that and yodel "Happy birthday to you!" over store-bought confectionaries! Embracing the person God made you to be is our spiritual act of worship.

Q: What advice would you offer for the mom who sees herself more as a "Pinterest fail" rather than having creative talent?

WS: I have friends who love social media because it fuels them and other friends who despise it because it makes them feel like a failure before they even try their hand at the simplest DIY project! In *Life Creative* we welcome women from both camps: those who are self-professed creatives and those who are only now, on the other side of birthing children, trying their hand for the first time at calligraphy, cooking, blogging, photography, jewelry-making, etc.

Pinterest and Instagram are definitely capturing this modern-day Renaissance! But you don't have to pin a single recipe or upload one lovely little square to Instagram to be invited to our Renaissance Faire.

Comparison is a terrible beast, killing creativity before it's even given life. We believe all of us, and our husbands and children too, were created in God's creative image. There was no mistake made when God doled out gifts. Just as there are varying skin tones, eye colors and pitches to our laughter, so are there innumerable talents living from home to home throughout the world.

Q: You believe all women were made to be creative. Can you explain why?

KS: Yes, we believe we were *all* created creative in some capacity. Each and every one of us is a perfect reflection of the Creator Himself, endowed with His ability to imagine something out of nothing. We call this inspiration, and isn't this how the universe came to be? His creation, first imagined and then executed. From nothing He made every atom, every molecule. We were fashioned able to live, move and breathe in the fullness of His creative likeness!

WS: One of the things I discovered in the writing of *Life Creative* was creativity is a very broad, all-inclusive camp! Some men and women, boys and girls are creative thinkers, problem solvers, changing the world one answer at a time. Businesswomen opening online stores, using their profits to do extraordinary things throughout the world are creative, out-of-the-box people too! The woman who makes scripture art for your wall or bibs for your baby — creative! The teacher who loves on your child with dyslexia, coming up with new methods to teach him, though others have thrown their hands up in exhaustion — creative! My husband who built our boys a tree fort and my mother a back porch — he's creative. And my father whose main love language is mathematical diagrams — creative!

I've said it before and I'll say it again and again: All are welcome to this modern-day Renaissance Faire!

Q: How will the mom who doesn't see herself as creative benefit from *Life Creative*?

WS: While we believe all women are fashioned in God's creative likeness, not every woman sees herself as an "artist." *Life Creative* is a call for women to embrace their God-purposed uniqueness and to remember God didn't just make her children "fearfully and wonderfully." He crafted *her* that way as well! Whether she once

delighted in canning preserves or reading novels late into the night, writing letters or hosting dinner parties, *Life Creative* is a letter to all women to look at how God created her and say, "Good job, God!"

KS: *Life Creative* isn't just about the painters, writers and photographers. It's also for the woman who loves her home. It's for the woman who delights at creating new meals in the kitchen or moving furniture around to give the living room a quick face lift. *Life Creative* is for the mom who finds great joy in throwing birthday parties or who pours her energy into her duties as the home-room mom at her kid's school. *Life Creative* isn't just for women who are making a living from their art, but it's for all women who simply enjoy pretty things. Women will walk away from this book with a new appreciation for how they were uniquely designed as creative beings.

Q: What encouragement can you offer to the mom in what you describe as "the Dark Ages of motherhood," or for whom the art and creativity seem to have been lost?

KS: Hold on, sweet mom. It really is true that the days are long, but the years are short. The children need so much of you in the early years, but days are coming when you'll find yourself with more time in your days, and the inspiration will be there waiting for you. In the meantime, look for ways you can use your artistic gifts right where you are, inside the walls of your home with your children, your most beautiful creations.

WS: One of the earliest messages from the book is that *everything* begins at home, so start there. Color with your children, make up stories as you tuck them under their covers and bring your guitar out into the family room again. When there are opportunities in your local community that fit your skill set, pray about it, talk through it with your husband and see if you might take a few cautious steps beyond the confines of your home.

Q: What does the Great Commission have to do with women's creative gifts?

WS: Motherhood often feels like a season of confinement. How in the world could we ever be part of taking God's message of love and salvation out into the great big world? Home and our people take everything we have, right where we are! But when Jesus sent His disciples "to the end of the earth," home is where it all began! In Acts 1:8, we read, "*But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.*" Jerusalem was home for the early church, Judea and Samaria her neighboring communities, and that's where it all began — outward from there. So it is for moms at home today. Look for ways to let your light shine right where you are, then into your neighborhood, your cul-de-sac, school, church, and local mercy ministries, and from there out into the end of the earth.

Q: How can today's busy moms authentically be involved in the "ends of the earth" part of the Great Commission from their homes without a plane ticket and a passport?

KS: Within the pages of *Life Creative*, we share the stories of many creative mothers who are blessing people around the world without ever leaving home. Women like Myquilin Smith (The Nester) and Melissa Michaels, both of whom are teaching women the art of hospitality through the embracing of home. There are photographers, jewelry makers and painters, all of whom showcase their art from their living rooms or dining room tables. A picture shared online has the power to bless someone half a world away. Mothers around the world are sharing their faith through their artistic talents, all without ever having to leave home. This is the beauty of living in our digital age.

WS: "Missionary" used to be a term reserved for the men, women and children who traveled to the underbelly of the globe to share Christ with others. Today we are all invited to live missional lives right where we are — in our homes and neighborhood. The more we catch the vision, the more passionate about sharing the Gospel we grow and the more we are propelled out into the world! I see it again and again, this outward moving force of the Great Commission call upon our lives. Kelli and I believe art can most definitely be an integral part of a woman's calling into the world! For example, I have friends who have made and sold scarves, pieces of art to be hung on walls and hosted concerts in their homes to help them fund mission trips to the other side of the world.

Q: How can moms guard themselves from the feeling of dying inside during the daily, God-honoring sacrifices of motherhood?

WS: We want women to see they are more than the sum of their mothering moments, more than a tally sheet of their creative gifts. While their artistic offerings are, no doubt, beautiful acts of worship, they're not the only way in which creative moms offer their lives as a living sacrifice. In fact, it is the parts that seem mundane and unseen in the ordinary days that have the potential to become a creative mom's most fragrant of offerings. We must, therefore, step back and look at the whole tapestry of each day to understand truly the totality of a creative mother's worship. She bakes, sew and, sings. She cleans, cooks, tickles backs, potty-trains, prays for her loved ones and befriends her neighbors.

Practically speaking, we encourage moms to find small moments in their daily routines to embrace themselves. As children grow, many moms find that the opportunities for those moments increase a bit. It's those soft, quieter moments that we encourage moms to embrace the creativity that's longing to escape.

Q: You offer wonderful advice in the book for creative moms venturing into the business world both online and in real life. What is the most important thing for these “mompreneurs” to keep in mind?

KS: How do I know if now is the right time? How can I know if this will work? What if I fail — or worse, what if I fail my family? These are common questions women ask themselves as they begin the process of dream chasing. Failure. It's a fear that plagues us all when we prepare to step beyond the predictable routines of our motherly lives and head into the more uncharted territory of a working mom.

In this chapter of *Life Creative*, we recognize the creative mother looking to expand her hobby into a business won't always be given a sign or hear an audible direction about where she should go next. In looking to pursue a business out of her art, she may find herself at a crossroads. Should she step forward and pursue her dreams or wait a little longer? While we can't give specific answers to those questions, we do encourage these women to evaluate if pursuing a business endeavor is right for them. We offer several examples of how to know if the time is right and questions to help them know when and if to take the steps toward building a business.

Q: It's a delicate task to balance art, faith and family. How can moms keep a balanced perspective when life seems anything but balanced?

KS: Wendy and I begin by acknowledging balance is fluid concept! What looks like “balance” for one person will look entirely different for the next. And there's a reason for that — because balance is a myth. Finding balance is a bit like hunting for a unicorn. Maybe it's out there, but nobody has ever actually seen it; they've only *heard* it exists.

WS: Kelli was a friend long before she was a writing partner, and one of the things she has taught me is balance was never meant to be achieved in the course of one 24-hour day. Some days it's all house work; other days we spend the majority of it building Legos on the floor. There are days for running errands and having play dates, where we pick up a frozen pizza for dinner, and other days when we pull away to write, edit photos for a client or sell our wares at a local farmers market. In the midst of this very full life, something akin to balance can be found if you are intentional to love well and be gracious to yourself along the way.

Q: You both are creative people, as this book clearly shows. How are you both keeping creative? What's next for you two?

KS: This year, I released two books, which has kept me elbow-deep in the work side of my creativity for the better part of the year. My novel *Like a River from Its Course* released in June. *Life Creative* releases in September. Once I get through the launches of both books, I look forward to diving back into the fun side of creativity! I have already started working on my second novel and look forward to getting lost in story once more. In addition, I will be speaking occasionally, sharing both the message of *Life Creative*, as well as the inspiration behind my novel. It will be a full, busy year in which I'll have even more opportunity to learn what it looks like to live this *Life Creative*!

WS: Honestly, my garden is where I'm having my most creative fun with my kids this season! My youngest and I grew sunflowers this past summer and are now learning to roast the seeds. The middle-est and I grew pumpkins and watermelons, and we are absolutely giddy each time we walk through his garden patch! My husband joins us too, as he's the carpenter who built our garden boxes. He also spends countless afternoons with our oldest son playing their guitars together as I turn our homegrown basil into pesto sauce!

As for what's next, I have a busy speaking calendar next year. I'll be sharing the messages of *Life Creative* and my other book, *Triggers: Exchanging Parents' Angry Reactions for Gentle Biblical Responses*, with women's groups around the U.S. And I have another message simmering on the back-burner of my mind. That's where inspiration resides for long stretches in this present season. Until the time is right and the words bubble up and out . . . stay tuned!

Learn more about more about *Life Creative* at www.lifecreative.me, and join the community on [@lifecreative](https://www.instagram.com/lifecreative).