

FOREWORD *by* BOB GOFF

Better Together

HOW WOMEN *and* MEN
CAN HEAL *the* DIVIDE AND
WORK TOGETHER
TO TRANSFORM *the* FUTURE



Danielle
Strickland

Better
Together

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Danielle Strickland



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Foreword

I try to live by a simple rule: love everybody, always. It may sound easy, but I've learned that simple is far from easy. For love to be realized in real life, it requires us to take risks, tell the truth, embrace discomfort, press through difficulties, change our minds and our behaviors, and most importantly, engage in relationships with each other. Our best learning is done in an environment marked by equal parts truth and kindness.

The truth often makes us uncomfortable. We can see this in the increasingly difficult discussions surrounding the relationships between women and men these days. You've heard the reports gushing out of the movements arising out of cultures of abuse and harassment. You've no doubt read the statistics that one in three women will experience sexual abuse in her lifetime. These are horrific numbers. Many women around the world can't walk home after work without legitimate fear of being attacked. Many women can't raise their voices, at all, for

fear of reprisal. In many countries girls can't go to school. To put it simply—this is not okay. Something needs to change. We need to speak up with kindness and unbending resolve about the truth of these things. We need to listen to the truest voices, not just the loudest ones. The reason is simple: you don't need volume when you're right.

In this book you're going to hear from one of the truest voices in my life. I am Danielle's student in many areas and have been for years. She has burned down more than a few of my beliefs to expose the truth behind them. Here's the thing. It didn't feel like she was an arsonist when she did; she sounded like a wise friend.

Men are also in a challenging loop. The statistics feel condemning, and some of the more truth-filled voices have turned harsh and resentful. Every motive, it seems, is open to being publicly questioned, and every action put under a microscope. It seems as if this has left many male leaders afraid. And fear never leads to anything good. Simply put, something needs to change.

But here's the good news: the solutions might not be as daunting as we may think. That's what I love about Danielle—she tells the truth but laces it with hope.

In *Better Together*, Danielle doesn't sugarcoat the painful and embarrassing truth—that's not what love does. She also doesn't make the mistake of oversimplifying the problems. Attacking the complexity of the issue with appropriate rigor, she presents insights, research, and actionable solutions to change things now in order to transform the future for our kids and their kids.

Whether we're opening a Love Does school for girls in Afghanistan or Mogadishu, Somalia, creating a safe house for

young women in Uganda, or celebrating the news of becoming a grandparent myself, I know that we all possess the power to change things for the next generation. Even more than that, I know that confronting injustice and inequality and looking for ways to create a better future are what love looks like. Love without action isn't love; it's merely an idea, and we've heard all the ideas. What we need are examples. Danielle is one of them, and I'm with her. I'm willing to take a look at the ways inequality works so I can change it. I'm willing to acknowledge that the relationship between men and women is in some places broken so I can do my part to fix it. I'm willing to embrace uncomfortable and hard things now so the future can be different for my grandkids. And if you can relate to this willingness to learn, then this book will help you.

Better Together is not a woman's book. It's not a declaration of war nor a plea for peace. It's a book for anyone who is courageous enough to realize they, like me, have much to learn. Let's do this together. We can dream about creating a better world, reconciling the genders, and living without fear, or we can wake up and start doing it right now. Let love, kindness, and truth be our greatest tools in the effort.

I hope you will read this book with an open mind, an open heart, and an open hand. I know that if you do, you will learn to love from one of love's wisest teachers. And a life rooted in love, with a hand open to receive, is what it will take to move us toward what you might only have imagined to be a distant possibility. That might be what I like the best about this book and its author—Danielle makes distant possibility seem like a no-brainer for today. She lives and breathes in the currency of what

could be. She sees the problem but also the possibilities. And this might be what we need more than ever before. Men and women were made to work together to transform the future. Not separate work, but together work. It is not only a winning formula for change; it's a way of love that is the most transformational currency on the planet.

Buckle up. Here's to a conversation about reconciliation, vision, partnerships, hope, equality, mutuality, and freedom. Once we read about it, while turning these pages in private, let's join together in living out what love looks like in public.

—Bob Goff, Chief Balloon Inflator and bestselling author of *Love Does* and *Everybody, Always*

The Map

For any journey it's helpful to have a map. Maps offer perspective, but they also help us plan the trip. The graphic on the following page is an attempt to show you what I've envisioned as a map of the mental process from where we are right now in our current relationship crisis, to where we want to be (reconciled, restored, and thriving as we live and work together in peace) and how we get there.

Our journey toward a transformed world where women and men can work better together will require us to start from the future. As you know, that's the beauty of a map. It helps us see where we want to go, our future destination, and figure out how to get there.

When it comes to social change, we don't usually think of the future or of maps. So though it may be counterintuitive, it is essential that we determine just that—where we want to end up so that we can figure out how to get there.

The Transformed Future

PART ONE:
Where We Are Going



Starting from the Future



What It Could Look Like
and Why It Matters



The Truth About Oppression



A Vision for Reconciliation

PART TWO:
Where We Find Ourselves



- | | | |
|---------------------------------|----------------|---|
| « The Pull Back of Fear | How We Feel | The Push Forward of Action » |
| « The Pull Back of Segregation | How We Live | The Push Forward of Proximity » |
| « The Pull Back of Patriarchy | How We See | The Push Forward of Clarity » |
| « The Pull Back of Cleaning Up | How We Think | The Push Forward of Transformed Beliefs » |
| « The Pull Back of Porn | How We Connect | The Push Forward of Truth » |
| « The Pull Back of Power Abused | How We Act | The Push Forward of Mutuality » |

PART THREE:
How We Get There



Stopping the Blame Game



Start Now and With You



Never Ever Give Up



Keeping Hope Alive

Think of it this way: **We aren't just cleaning up a mess. We are building a new world.** A world where we can embrace our differences, end oppression, and learn how to live and work together in harmony, prosperity, and peace.

It occurred to me while I was mapping out this journey that everything we do right now is either a pull back from or a push toward a transformed future. There is no neutral ground. At the center of the map is a cross because, in all honesty, Jesus is the only sure way to get from here to there. He is the only hope we have for restoration.

As we position ourselves at the cross, we will find we have the strength to push toward the future of a better world. If not, we will easily pull back even more into our present hopeless, deteriorating condition.

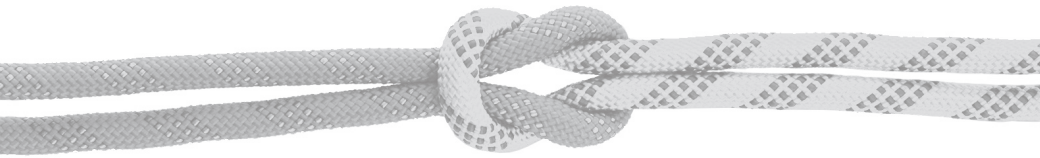
Each of us faces this invitation personally, but I sincerely hope we hear it collectively. I have a hunch it'll be a helpful exercise to explore the push and pull of our current opportunity toward restored relationships. Like a workout regimen, there will be things to pay attention to, proper posturing, pacing, and new exercises that will get us in much better shape if we are intentional in our pursuit. I'd like to make some real progress. So be prepared for practical and applicable content. And don't be afraid to give it a try.

But here's the deal. There is no magic bullet or fairy godmother who will fix this problem. It is up to us. We will shape the future by what we do or don't do right now. Are we willing to do the work required to change the trajectory of history? Are we willing to acknowledge where we are and where we want to go, and do we have the courage to take the steps necessary to move forward? These are questions that each of us and every community will need to answer for ourselves.

This is a strategic time for that answer to be a resounding yes! I'm praying that as we catch a vision of a different future, we will have the audacious faith and tenacious actions to live it out, together.

PART ONE

Where We Are Going



ONE

Starting from the Future

Real change comes when people are enabled to use their thinking and their energy in a new way, using a different system of thought, different language, and having fresh visions of the future.

—SCILLA ELWORTHY

I had read several dozen Twitter comments and I was tired of it. Yes, I had agreed to speak at a conference recently rocked by accusations of sexual misconduct and harassment by the founder. The tweets kept accusing me of kowtowing to patriarchy. *How could I speak on a stage built by misogyny?* they asked. They said it was obvious that I must not care about the voice of abused women. I must admit, I do a fair job at ignoring dumb comments by misinformed people on social media, but these seemed to be low blows.

Friends started to connect, and the conversations began: Was I ignoring my responsibility as a woman? Was I missing an opportunity to stick it to “the man” (not just one man but structures and systems that have benefited from ignoring the blatant and dangerous realities of patriarchy for centuries)? Was I benefiting at the expense of victims? As I talked it out and thought it through, I began to realize just how difficult this time is for all of us.

I’ve longed for equality to emerge as a realistic and rational way to live in our world. I’ve yearned for mutual thriving. I’ve experienced men and women working together, and I’ve been enriched by it. I’ve read of the impact women’s empowerment has for the whole global community. And I remain completely convinced through the Scriptures that true mutuality is the original sacred design of humanity.¹ Men and women are meant to work together for the flourishing of the world. When you spread that idea, people seem to agree. Mutual flourishing? Yes, please. Thriving together? Absolutely. And yet our world remains divided and dismissive of the gender equity dream. I think the real dilemma is not in the *what* but the *how*. *How* do we do it?

In this era people are paralyzed. I realized if my decision to simply speak at a leadership conference was filled with such difficulty, how much more difficult would it be to live out the principles of equity and empowerment for both women and men in everyday life? How can a man interact with a female colleague without his relationship becoming either robotic or flirtatious? How can we work together without suspicion or fear at a time of heightened suspicion and fear? How can we change and challenge systems without taking a side? Who is the enemy, anyway?

Women who demand change? Men who abuse them? Silence and fear? Systems and structures? *I mean, who do we blame?*

This can be confusing. I've worked for decades with women who have suffered at the hands of men. And I mean *suffered*. I remember driving home one day after hearing the story of one particular woman I was working with who was tortured (yes, literally) in an extremely horrific way for a long time and by many men. It was infuriating. I wondered, after hearing yet another story from a woman who had been so humiliated and abused at the hands of even more men, if there were any good men in the world. *Is it even possible for men to be good to women?* I really wondered, on the brink of despair.

But right as those thoughts began to sink into my heart, I pulled into my driveway. My four-year-old boy met me at the door. He had a huge smile on his beautiful little face, and he wrapped his arms around my heavyhearted body and gave me a great big four-year-old bear hug. I could feel my despair lifting. That night, as I tucked him in bed, I went through our regular nighttime ritual. "Who made you?" I asked my little boy as we cuddled under his fire-truck blankets.

"God made me!" he replied with a big, beautiful smile.

"How did he make you?" I asked him.

"He made me good," came the rhythmic reply. And when I looked at this little grinning guy, something shifted in the depths of my own being. I knew it was true. And past the doubt, fear, cynicism, and despair, beckoning me to pay attention was a piece of gold buried in a pile of life experience. When I dug deep down into the truest of truths, I agreed. God made him good.

Trying to stuff down the reality of my day, but without success, I wondered if the goodness of this moment was destined to be lost. Does my little boy even have a chance of growing up good in a world where women suffer at the hands of men in such a predominant way? Plan International states, “Globally, it’s estimated that 1 in 3 women will experience physical or sexual abuse in their lifetime.”² One in three.

Now, to be sure, abuse happens to everyone—boys and men are also abused. At least one in six men have been sexually abused or assaulted as children or as adults.³ Those rates of abuse are not good. But the disturbing truth is that even when boys and men are abused, their abusers are male: “According to a 2010 National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey, 90 percent of perpetrators of sexual violence against women are men. Moreover, when men are victims of sexual assault (an estimated one in 71 men, and one in six boys), 93 percent reported their abuser was a man. It’s true that women also assault men, but even when victims of all genders are combined, men perpetrate 78 percent of reported assaults.”⁴

So I’m aware of all those stats and I’m looking at my four-year-old boy and I’m wondering if he is somehow destined for “badness.” And then I snap out of it. Of course he isn’t destined for “badness.” Of course what happens to men is not fate. Men don’t become abusers by accident. Women don’t become abused by God’s design. We aren’t trapped in some fatalistic setup. We aren’t animals who can’t seem to choose between our instincts and our behaviors. We aren’t robots who can program ourselves out of our humanity. We are human. *We can choose.* We can change. We

can grow and learn. We can become different and better. If the trajectory of human history has taught us anything at all, it's that change is possible! You can almost hear the scriptural invitation from God almighty: "I put before you life or death. Choose life" (Deuteronomy 30:19, my paraphrase). It is precisely because we can choose that we can change.

We can choose another way to live together. This choice is collective and personal. We choose together, but we also make the choice for ourselves. I can choose another way. Another way for my son and for everyone else's sons as well. I can refuse the shackles of fatalism that repeat the patterns of previous generations. I can choose to refuse to believe that my son, because he was born male, is someone predestined to become part of a patriarchal system of oppression toward women. I can be part of that choice by helping him discover that his behavior can contribute to the making of a better world. I can raise him to appreciate and value women. He can learn to work with them in a respectful and mutually flourishing way. He can be good—indeed, even more than that, he was designed for goodness. I know him better than anyone else on the planet. He is not marked or set or stuck in some distorted destiny to be an abuser or a dismitter or a harasser or a jerk. He was made to be good. And to be good includes learning how to work with everyone, especially women, to make the whole world good again. Which is the work of the gospel.

If ever there was an example of a good man, it is the person of Jesus. The perfect man. He did not live to be an exception to the rest of humanity. He died and lived to change the possibilities for humanity so everyone could join him in being good. This is

why we call it good news. It's a restoration movement that seeks to move everyone toward transformation. Including the relationships between women and men.

That's why I'm writing this book. I refuse to believe that all men are bad. I also refuse to believe that all women are victims. I don't want to just be hopeful, I want to be *strategically* hopeful. I want to strive toward a better world where women and men can work together and not against each other.

I was on a pilgrimage with the movement Amplify Peace recently. Part of our journey was to spend some time learning from Sami Awad, a nonviolence activist from Bethlehem. Sami has been using his life to make peace in a region of the world that is extremely divided. The hostility is high. The divisions seem embedded in history. Change is hard to fathom.

Sami spoke to us about the frustration of trying to help people who have suffered from long-term systemic oppression. When he looked into previous campaigns for change, he found that people often tended to dig into their past to discover strength to gain momentum for the future. They typically tried to reach back for something from their origin story to help them overcome their present story. But the trouble with that method for Sami and his Middle Eastern friends was that the more they tried to dig into their past, the more oppression they found. He didn't know how to overcome the reality of a linear momentum theory.

One day he met someone who showed him a different strategy. He was fascinated to discover a theory called nonlinear theology. To put it very simply, it's the idea of starting from the future. You use the potential of the future to get your momentum

for change. Instead of digging through the past, trying to sort through every injustice and oppression—like a magician pulling a never-ending ribbon out of a can, or a knot that only becomes more knotted as you try to untangle it—you leave the past in the past for a moment and start fresh with a smooth, clear future.

So Sami hosts multifaith vision sessions where Jewish, Muslim, and Christian widows come together. They spend some time envisioning their future. They picture themselves at the end of their lives, in their rocking chairs on the porch of their houses. Then they share what they envisioned. And here is where the transformation begins. They discover that although they all come from such difficult and different backgrounds, they share the dream of a better future. All of the widows envision similar things. They see their children and grandchildren playing in peace. They picture everyone they love with enough, sharing and loving each other. They see the people they love alive and happy, belonging and contributing to the goodness of the world. They envision peace. And in a small amount of time, in that little, simple exercise, they realize that their dreams for the future are the same. Suddenly they have found some common ground. Some shared hope. Some way of mobilizing their efforts in the same direction!

I think the systemic oppression at the heart of the relationship between women and men is as complex as it gets. There is an old joke about a genie who is summoned and tells the master who called him that she can have only one wish. The master wishes for peace in the Middle East. The genie begs her for a simpler task, complaining about the impossibility of the wish. So the master

says she's been looking for the perfect man who would make for a perfect relationship. The genie says, "Fine. Peace in the Middle East it is!" To be sure, if we were to try to undo the knot of gender relationships, it would feel impossible. But I think the strategy Sami uses might be a more effective one for change.

When I dream of my son's future, I'm deeply aware that my dreams are much like the ones you have for your sons and daughters. Whether you have a girl or a boy, or you're thinking of your brother or sister, husband or wife, mother or father, your dreams for them are the same as mine. I dream of a peace-filled life. I dream of flourishing and thriving. I dream of happiness and hope. I dream of meaning and purpose. I dream of fulfilled destiny and celebrated gifts. For my children, I dream of them contributing to the redemption of this world.

If we pay attention, I think we will discover that our dreams for the future are the perfect starting place for changing our present. We have much more in common as we reach into our shared future. Rather than just rehashing the problems of the past, we can move forward together. Honestly, if we were to try to wade through the intricate brokenness of the relationship between women and men, we would need a much bigger book! Instead, let's take a strategy out of Sami's playbook and start with the future. I'm believing that our shared view of our future world looks like equality, freedom, and flourishing. This is the future we are all hoping for.



Better Together by Danielle Strickland

We are currently at a strategic cultural intersection with relationships between women and men eroding. And it seems no one knows what to do. While it is good for women to expose their pain, what often happens is that they immediately blame the person at the other end of it, which sets up a never-ending cycle of accusations, denial, avoidance, and ultimately devastation for everyone involved.

Better Together is a beacon of hope in a challenging storm. It's where thoughts can be rechanneled and hope rekindled as author Danielle Strickland offers steps toward a real and workable solution.

Danielle says, "I refuse to believe that all men are bad. I also refuse to believe that all women are victims. I don't want to be just hopeful, I want to be strategically hopeful. I want to work toward a better world with a shared view of the future that looks like equality, freedom, and flourishing."

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