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**Opinion: More than fragile vessels**

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[By STEPHANIE RUTT](https://www.concordmonitor.com/byline?byline=By%20STEPHANIE%20RUTT)

Published: 7/2/2023 7:00:34 AM

Modified: 7/2/2023 7:00:20 AM

*Rev. Dr. Stephanie Rutt is founding minister of the Tree of Life Interfaith Temple in Amherst. She lives in Nashua. To read more of her writing visit becomeaforceforgood.com.*

Anyone can enjoy a good fairytale to escape the stresses of the day. The problem comes when the boundaries are blurred between fantasy and reality.Such is the case with Baker Mitchell, founder of the North Carolina public charter school, highlighted this week when the U.S. Supreme Court declined to hear the school’s defense of its blocked requirement that girls wear skirts.

In [Reuters June 26th article](https://www.reuters.com/legal/us-supreme-court-turns-away-case-charter-schools-mandatory-skirts-girls-2023-06-26/) by Andrew Chung, Mitchell said the school offers a traditional-values-based education designed to preserve chivalry, with women “regarded as a fragile vessel that men are supposed to take care of and honor.”

Say what? Fragile? Really? If it weren’t so systemically dangerous for girls and women, I’d actually feel a bit embarrassed for a public admission revealing such an unveiled ignorance of women, of the stark realities facing many daily, and of women’s ongoing quest for equality and autonomy — to be seen, heard, counted.

Clearly, it’s Mitchell who’s in need of an education. While he might imagine his own vessel fired in some kiln full of visions of knighthood rescuing damsels in distress, many women, particularly those representing over half of our nation’s poor, have no such luxury to indulge in imaginary flights of fantasy. They’re too busy making lunches, dealing with irate bosses because the bus was late again, and hoping there’s one more box of mac and cheese for dinner.

While Mitchell touts, in Ben Finley’s June 28th [Associated Press article](https://apnews.com/article/north-carolina-charter-school-skirts-071a6bff9a62a0e3f233cd9bcf29d24f), that his school reduces the gap for racial and income disparities in test scores, he appears to show little awareness or appreciation for the home environments and daily struggles that go on behind the scenes in the homes of those children, homes headed mostly by women.

And, rest assured, these women are no damsels. They wake up every morning caged by unsurmountable circumstances yet push through another day, silently standing on the graves of their own forgotten dreams. As a minister, I’ve sat with these women and seen into their vessels, clearly weather-worn but remarkably sturdy.

It might do Mitchell well to come out of his fantasy, put down his golden sword, and sit awhile in the unending turmoil, oppressive stress, unrelenting challenges and emotional depravity these women endure daily.

If so, he might just see right before him, not helpless, weakened, one-dimensional damsels waiting for the prince to arrive, but infinitely multidimensional women: gritty, messy, hard-core, achy, angry, no-shit-can’t-give-up women, who’ll do anything to make sure their kid gets a birthday present or has a gift under the Christmas tree. Women who often fight alone, every day, to be all things to their children, with little left for themselves, in a society where many just look away.

If he dared to look, he might see Rachael who scours thrift stores, and garage sales in fancier neighborhoods, for first-day-of-school clothes for her children, and who cuts coupons from tossed paper inserts hoping there’ll be enough money for food. She no longer knows where her children’s father is, though her oldest son still asks at bedtime. He remembers a story they used to read and it’s still his favorite. “Read it again, mom,” he pleads, “just one more time.”

Or he might see Michelle and her daughter who has a chronic illness. Though Michelle works fulltime and her husband balances two, sometimes three, jobs, they can’t afford health insurance. After laying her daughter to sleep, she knows another restless night is coming. “Please don’t let me miss another day at work,” keeps her at the edge of an abyss where she knows there’s no safety net. Still, she gets up each morning, weary and worn, and does another day.

And cutting across socio-economic divides, he might see women like Susan everywhere. Susan desperately wishes summer will pass so she can stop wearing long sleeves to cover up her bruises. Her pastor tells her the problem would right itself if she could just be a better wife. A pretty young woman, she frequently endures subtle inappropriate touches, and the probing eyes of strange men, much like coyotes anxious to feast on the lone fawn strayed from its mother.

I would say to Mitchell, and to men of similar ilk, you may want to cast we women as damsels, lift us up only to label us like paper dolls in some fairytale, but don’t ever presume us to be fragile! You’ve not earned the right, not even in your fantasy world, for every day we women rise up to fight, again and again, battles you’ve never known.

Perhaps Mitchell thought that calling us such would leave us giggly, fanning our blush as damsels rightly should. Ah, but the reality is quite the opposite. So, on second hand, it might serve him well to stay guarded by his own flights of fantasy because, in the real world, he just might discover what he fears most . . . that we women are more resilient, more powerful, than he could ever imagine.