

Reflections on Foster Parenting

by Brenda Zook

The world is filled with hurting, needy children. In our county there are currently 58 children in foster care; in the state of Pennsylvania, the number is 20,000. The global picture contains myriad uncounted little ones who are suffering, abused, hungry, dying. The needs are overwhelming. I am the little child at the seashore, surrounded by thousands of beached starfish. A cynical onlooker, watching the child fling another starfish toward the life-giving water, queries, "What difference can you possibly make – look at these thousands of starfish?" And I reply with the child's hope-filled voice, "I made a difference for that one."

For our family the adventure of giving foster care began in 1998. At that time it seemed clear that God was leading Max, Jonathan (age 11) Joseph (age 8), and me to invest some of the incredible treasures he had given to us in the lives of people who had not experienced much of what we took for granted—meals around the table, a safe place to be a kid, an imperfect yet intact family. At that time we had no way of foreseeing that we were in for the adventure(s) of our lives. God's will was clear, but the way of God would lead us through years of terrible pain and amazing joy. We have found the way of obedience to be both incredibly costly and immeasurably rewarding.

The rewards of being a foster family: Where do I begin? Max and I have experienced the joy of becoming significant adults in the life of a young person. "You guys are the only

adults we know that don't hit each other," one of "our guys" told us. Although Josh* left our home with a defiant spirit at the age of 17, at 22 he now returns several times a month for home-cooked meals and car maintenance assistance. We get to meet the girlfriends (!!) because we're "the family".

The broadening of the world of our family growing up in the snug isolation and protection of Big Valley (Josh* called it "life in the bubble") has been an additional benefit to our family. Our sons have observed first hand the dark fallout of drug and alcohol abuse. In addition, they have had opportunities to put their faith into action throughout their growing up years rather than waiting until they are adults to "serve God." They have shared willingly (most of the time) their home and their "stuff" and their time and their space and their parents. If life is a ball game, our sons have had the opportunity to play the game, not just run the drills in practice day after day. None of us plays perfectly; there are fouls and time-outs and turnovers, but we are all in the game together.

Most of all, our lives have been incredibly enriched by our experiences as a foster family. We have laughed uproariously at the made up "knock, knock" jokes of a five-year-old (we still retell some of them) and heard the first words of little James. We remember Buzzie* singing "Up from the Grave He Arose" in the bathtub at full volume. We still drink tea from the patch in the garden that Josh* planted because he thought it was the coolest thing to make meadow tea from a wild plant. We have seen God at work in our world, in the lives of the foster children we've known, in our own family. The ripples of benefit continue to touch us every day.

But I would be less than a truth teller if I did not also include some of the hard stuff we have experienced. Saying goodbye after months and months of shared life and love is terrible. It is a pain not unlike death grief, yet our kids aren't in heaven. (It seems quite the opposite, sometimes.) Once when we were discussing his upcoming move home, a little fellow told me, "then you'll be a stranger again." I wanted to protest, but it turned out he was mostly right, as we haven't seen him in nearly five years. Still, we try to remember that it isn't about us. It's about them. We love them now (and always.) Warnings about not getting too attached or too close are not helpful for us or for them. (Wouldn't you like to live in a family like that??) This is exactly what these kids need, a place to belong and people to whom they can be attached. Yes, the change of separation will be wrenching for all of us,



but if they've learned to love and care and connect, they can take those skills with them. We send with each child the gift of the memory of having been deeply loved.

Another difficult aspect of foster parenting has been the experience of having unconditional love rejected. Looking back we can now see it as a season during which our love was being tested for authenticity, but at the time the rejection was deeply painful and seemingly permanent. I wanted my sons to learn about forgiveness sometime...but not at such a young age. The healing and wholeness we now see in those deeply wounded relationships is clear evidence of God at work in our sons' lives, but it is not a path I would have chosen for any of us.

Finally, adding a person to the family, even for a short time, takes lots of time and energy in terms of working out relationships, boundaries, discipline, etc. These kids think differently because their view of normal has been skewed by their life experiences. Trust takes time, time, time to develop. If a child has been lied to a thousand times by adults, how many times do you think you'll have to tell the truth and follow through before he trusts you? (Stop counting and just live a life of integrity!)

Rewards, joy, pain, difficulty. All of these are the tools God has been using in my life as a foster parent to teach me the ways of his will. Could I have learned them some other way? Possibly, but this has been God's way for me. What am I learning?

I am learning that being a foster parent is a God-sized job. From Henry Blackaby's book *Experiencing God* I learned that when God asks me to do something He asks me to do something only He can do so that when it is done I will know Who did it. Being a foster parent is a lot like being a "regular" parent, only more so! I am learning to lean hard on God. He always gives me what I need, and He stretches me to fit the tasks He's called me to do. Stretching is not usually comfortable but it is essential for growth and obedience.

I am learning that God gives me love for the people He brings to my life. They are people, not projects. I am learning that insides are more important than outsides. Lots of kids need friendly involved adults who are willing to look beyond piercings and weird clothes and blue hair to the hurting, gifted, God-created soul inside.

I am learning to listen a lot and pray more. I can pray about impossible things, things that no amount of planning and scheming and worrying about can alter. I don't always know what God wants, but I can pray and then accept what happens. I remember traveling to the Children and Youth office with a little carseat in the back seat, listening to a Rich Mullens song in the car, "You're on the Verge of a Miracle", and I was afraid to even hope that the song contained a message for me and that tiny boy staring at nothing. But we prayed and so did many other people, and two weeks ago, that little guy, after nearly four years in our home, became a Zook. And for me it was a miracle.

Why am I telling you all these things? We need more people on the beach tossing starfish back into the waves. We, as the church, the body of Christ, possess a vast reservoir of treasure that needs to be shared with those who are drying up for lack of life giving water.

What can you do? You can pray. Battles for the next generation are being waged all around us, and the people on the front lines get tired and weary and battle worn, and sometimes we listen to the voice that says, "What difference can you possibly make?" Pray for people you know who are case workers, foster parents, attorneys, and judges whose decisions impact children. If you don't know anyone in those positions, find out who these people are in your county and begin to pray for them by name.

You can also give time and interest to children that are in foster care or might end up there if no one gets involved. If there are foster children attending your church, please remember that you aren't a foster church – you're the real thing! Take time to talk to them, and always tell them your name each time you connect with them, until they come to know you. If they aren't accustomed to having adults take an interest in their lives (that's usually the case), they aren't going to "throw the ball back" very well conversationally. That's okay, because you are the adult; just keep lobbing the ball in their direction, and eventually it may come back. Remember, they are already way out of their comfort zone (they're in your church!), so expand your circle to include them. Make an effort to include them in events and activities. Their foster families love them a lot, but sometimes they need a break. Speaking from personal experience, it is such a gift when someone volunteers to babysit a younger child or invites an older one to a ball game or picnic. We get tired of finding childcare, and sometimes, we aren't sure if our kids are "wanted", so an unsolicited offer of time involvement is a boost to everyone.

Finally, you can consider becoming a foster parent. Oh how we need godly families in the foster care system. This nation is unraveling, one family system at a time, and one way to strengthen those fibers is to weave the children into connected families where God's love is present. Foster care is a tremendous statement of living faith to a watching world that has become skeptical of vocal evangelicalism with little action. It is great to be pro-life; when a drug addicted woman chooses life for her little baby, then what? Are we willing to continue to choose life for this child by providing a home and family where he can grow up to choose Jesus? There is truth in cursing the darkness, in condemning the evil in our world. But truth is not enough. Only as we carry our flickering candle of grace into the dark places will they be transformed into light.

"Become a foster parent; change a life – yours!!" When I first read this catchy slogan in a local paper over six years ago, I had only begun to understand the truth of the message it contained. I had only begun to glimpse the heights and depths through which God would lead in this walk of obedience. Are you ready for a challenge, for the challenge of a lifetime? Do you want to make a difference in the life of one starfish? Then, become a foster parent. Change a life. Yours. **BB**

**Names have been changed*

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