

Life Echoes

By

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***A Christian's Perspective On Children's Issues
Through A Separation & Divorce***

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I thank God for his faithfulness throughout these dark and troubled times. It is with a sense of hope and anticipation that I look forward to the better days already begun.

Introduction

Any book about a marriage breakdown is not easy to read - or to write - or especially to experience. Of the three books about the loss of my marriage and life after, this book about parenting my children through a separation and divorce was the most excruciating to write.

I felt like a wet towel being twisted tighter and tighter as the project progressed. I am glad that it is done.

The pain of watching one's children suffer is something that every parent dreads. No matter why they suffer, parents would gladly exchange places and take the suffering rather than seeing their children in pain.

This book spans five years dating from the separation to the present. Each chapter points to a facet of the experience of parenting children of divorce. The chapters are not chronological but each was written as it happened. So you will see time jump back and forth but the topics seemed to work best in this order.

As in the other books, I have used pen names for all of the characters. Some details have been changed to disguise identities but this is a true story and this is what really happened. I would like to thank Family Heritage Resources for their understanding and cooperation in protecting our privacy.

There is some comfort in thinking about children worse off than your own. Many children grow up in agony without food, shelter and medicine. For others, they suffer horrible neglect or abuse emotionally and physically. This is not one of those extreme cases. But before you dismiss these reflections as sour grapes, realize that I am not someone who looks at how much worse it could be in life. I look to a higher standard of how much better life could be for the children. Sadly our custody system says that unless something is terribly wrong, the status quo of who has the children will prevail. The comparison is not primarily who has the better home environment because not changing the children's situation is seen as the best first choice.

In working with a secular court and custody system, when the issues deal with values, the authorities are reluctant to take any position that might be seen as making value judgments. So if your differences include one parent trying to live as a Christian and the other not caring to do so, the courts are disinterested in that difference. In fact, there may be an unspoken bias against the person with the religious emphasis.

If you are reading this as someone who has not experienced a separation or divorce when children are involved, please try to have an open mind. At times you may just feel like I (and friends that you know going through this) am spending too much time thinking about all of this. Just "G.O.W.Y.L.". Get On With Your Life! There is a GOWYL for us as individuals who have worked through the grieving process of a separation and divorce. But when children are involved, the pain is much more intense and the problems much more urgent. Until they get past their crisis years, a parent will continue to be very concerned.

All parents have to work through the concerns for how their children will fare in their growing up years. Will they make good choices? Will they learn from the bad ones? Will they embrace faith or reject it. But for parents of children of divorce there is a who other layer of concern as you wonder how much extra pressure the children are experiencing as they have to contend with the tensions of two homes and many new relationships. For the parent of divorce, big part of the twinge is the knowledge that the adults in their life did not protect them from these horrible experiences.

The good news for we who are parents of divorced children is that there really is good news. For all the difficulties, we can make a positive difference for our children. Children can overcome these obstacles just as other children struggle with other disadvantages.

I wrote this book as a window on one person's experience. I don't claim to be the same as you or any friend you may have as tough times are faced. But as many human experiences have common threads, I trust that you will find looking at this still to be completed tapestry. Perhaps it will help to know that others experience similar difficult times and survive. If this book shares some hope, then I am thankful.

Now, here's my story...

Life Echoes

The painter, James Lumber has created a style of painting that portrays an image of the present. It could be a scene of a city street, an old harbor or by a river. These present images in beautiful hues are accompanied by a faded, ghost-like image of something from the past at that place.

The modern city street could include a misty image of an old milk wagon. Some pirates could shadow children playing by the harbor. An old man fishing a river could be present. Faded and from the past are figures of little boys from long ago going for the big one. Life echoes.

These paintings capture the experience of life echoes. While no longer present in a place, the echoes of special people can seem to remain in our present - not as ghosts but as tangible memories.

If you have been in a great stadium for a big game where fans are cheering and celebrating, you can return later when the game is over and the stadium is empty. With a little imagination, you can still sense that crowd's presence.

Those who have lost a loved one to death know this experience very well. In their home, the memories of them sitting in a favorite chair or making dinner can be painfully strong. You can walk around a corner and expect to see them just as they always were. But now they are gone.

Among the most painful life echoes are those of your children absent because of a separation or divorce. Everywhere in your home are reminders of these missing treasures of your life - somewhere else today.

This book explores the life echoes of children of divorce. How do you cope when they are not with you? How do you parent children of divorce when they are? If you have children or grandchildren of divorce, come walk with me as a common sojourner in this painful wilderness. I'll share some things that worked and some experiences I'd avoid. If you were writing this, you could add many stories and insights of your own.

I had just entered my thirties when this began. Ted was four and Laura was almost two. Over the almost five years since my little ones became children of a broken home, many things have happened to them. And to me.

Here you will find glimpses into some of the experiences, feelings and struggles of parenting children of divorce. In the earliest stages, it was as a separated husband single parenting while seeking reconciliation. Later you can observe a resolution and closure toward my

lost marriage. After four years, I now have married a wonderful woman and we parent Ted and Michelle together. So there are chapters about how new relationships impact the children.

At this stage, I have joint-custody of the children but that is in name only. We are still progressing toward a custody trial.

If you know people who parent children of divorce or minister to their families, this book will give you a window on our world with all of its pain, successes, despair and hope. Five years ago, I longed for someone who had survived the earliest and worst stages of a separation experience while parenting their children of a broken home. Perhaps this book will give you some hope and some shared experiences as you go through your challenges not just as a parent but a parent of children of divorce. This is not a book of answers but rather just some markers from my trail.

If a life is a painting full of rich colors and hues then parents of children of divorce have a canvas where certain small figures appear and disappear with an access schedule. Those are the life echoes of a broken home.

Let's gaze into those paintings and look at some of my life echoes.

The Looking Glass

In this book you are invited to take a look through a looking glass into world where nothing is quite right. Familiar - but not quite right.

As with Alice, you may see many things that are curiouser and curiouser. But it is not all bad news. There are many fun and triumphant moments. But it is a different world with different rules of what is normal. Some things will make you feel very small. Other experiences will make you feel like a giant. Most of the time, you'll just wish that you were back to normal again. But it will be harder and harder to remember what normal was - er..., is - umm... will be?

You may have an angry ex-spouse running around saying "Off with your head!" In your case, the family therapist may just smile at you like the Cheshire Cat giving you no clue about what they are thinking. At some school event you may find yourself seated at the table with some very weird people like the Mad Hatter (your ex-spouse's new live-in?) bringing to mind the very merry unbirthday party. Trying to get to talk with your lawyer may be as challenging as catching up with the White Rabbit since they are usually late for the next appointment already too.

For many people it is just a moment in time before they find themselves in a very strange new life. The decision of a spouse to separate and divorce creates a new reality for the family now broken. When there are also children the custody journey will change all of them forever.

For me, the change was sudden. There were no trial separations or marriage counselling. One day it was just over. Judy was gone and we were in a strange new life. She never to my knowledge contemplated reconciliation. While the early statements were that this was just for some "space", my inner sense always suggested that it was much more permanent than that.

I went through many months with the hope that whatever had snapped in Judy would snap back. It did not. Sadly, she had others who encouraged Judy to harden her position and to have a real separation. In their ignorance (or willfulness?) they played a definite part in creating and cementing the breach.

In the years of the custody battle, I have learned more about the convoluted area of family law than I ever wanted to know. I have spent enough to earn a few Harvard law degrees. Dealing with a whole host of social agencies has been a largely negative experience. Systems are overburdened, personnel are sometimes under-qualified and inevitably it is very slow.

For the sake of my children, Ted and Michelle, I entered this new world of the looking glass. Many parents bail out on their children because the pain of the separation and divorce is so severe that they can't cope as it is. To continue your relationship with the children means ongoing and often hostile contacts with the ex-spouse.

That is one of the reasons that some parents just disappear from the life of the children. It is just too painful. However as with most pain, if you postpone dealing with life you often pay much more later. In this case, absent parents must live with years of regret once the children are grown up and they ask, "Where were you."

That's why it is important to find ways of coping with the pain and frustrations of custody issues for the sake of the children now as well as yourself later. I trust that as you observe my wanderings in this world of the looking glass that you will find some tools to help you improve your relationship with your children.

They need you and as a parent - you need them too. So hang on. It is an altogether remarkable journey. But it is one that you can and will survive with God's help. Eventually, you will find yourself on the other side of the looking glass again with the relationship with your children solid and secure.

But until then welcome to the wonderland of parenting children of divorce...

Pilot to Copilot

Parenting was intended to be a crew activity. The challenges and uncertainties of piloting a family in this difficult society need the participation of many people. God equipped most family planes with a pilot and copilot who as parents have the primary responsibility for the flight.

Others who help with the navigation, communication and maintenance of the family include the extended family, friends, and our church family. All assist in the hair-raising adventure of raising children.

Pilot to Copilot...

The advantage of copiloting-piloting is the ability to share not only the time but also the judgment calls that must be made as you run into turbulence or storms along the way. No two people will see the horizon in the same way but the shared perspectives make for a safer flight.

I valued the person God had given me to fly the unfriendly skies of this age. She was a great Mom and the balance of our personalities and strengths were just about right. We had agreed to follow God's navigational charts and communicate with his control tower. It was comfortable to fly with her beside me. Together we had a great supporting crew of people who really cared about our children and us.

Then something happened. My partner said she was going for a walk at the back of the plane -she needed to stretch her legs. I was concerned but she assured me that she wasn't leaving the plane, she just needed some space. My gut told me that it was more than that. It did not take long to find out that her walk to the back included taking her parachute with her and when the "open door" light came on, I knew she had bailed out.

At first it appeared that she had bailed out on just me but as time would tell, she had abandoned not just me but her roots as well. She rewrote the flight manual of how to fly and our flight log of what our marriage had been like based on her current need to justify her choice.

While I had been devastated with the loss of the one who with me had covenanted to share our life's journey, I hoped we could at least fly the children in the same direction. Two years later, it is clear that we not only can not cooperate but that in many ways we are flying in opposite directions. I have also found sabotage on board by her and others who bailed out with her.

When I see her plane coming my way, I must duck because she and hers train her guns on me to shoot me out of the air. As tough as it is for me, it is agonizing to watch the children. They must keep changing planes.

The crew on Judy's plane and the activities on board are very different than the life the children experienced when we were together. There are those who have shrugged and who continue to support her flight plans.

How do Ted and Michelle cope with these two radically different experiences? They must continue to change planes for the next number of years. Ultimately, they will choose which direction they will go.

That is true of all children when they grow up. But I never expected that those choices would be between their father's values and their mother's. What a tragedy for these children who were committed to be raised in a God-centered environment.

Pilot to copilot-....just dead air answers back.

Kidding Around

After I tuck Michelle and Ted into their beds, there is a special peace that comes over me. I often utter a thank-you to God for the sight of the two of these precious joys sleeping in my home.

My world is very different when the kids are around. When they are not here, I often pray for them. How are they doing? What is it like for them to be sleeping over there? It has become such an unsanctified place. Each time I drop them back to Judy's place, I despair as I watch them walk through that door. How do they cope? Kids are flexible and resilient. They do adapt.

Children are also impressionable. Values are caught as they observe their environment. If Judy is successful in maintaining the status quo in the custody battle, the children will end in her care for most the time for the next fifteen years. It is a small consolation to know that they will be in school most of the time. It's pretty bad when being in a secular school is preferred.

I have known there would come a point in their lives when the children would no longer be at home and would fend for themselves. I had not expected that to be so soon in so many ways. The probabilities of winning custody have never been good. While it is beginning to change, the bias continues to be in favor of mothers over fathers. Judy has had the advantage because I chose reconciliation at the beginning. She then dragged out all the necessary stages of mediation and assessment that added more time to the status quo.

The fact that I have been working for two years to gain increased time with the children is irrelevant. She has had them more time than me over the two years is relevant. The system favors the militant and the uncooperative. It penalizes those who try to save a marriage and rewards those who leave.

So many differences in our parenting now revolve around values. But for a Christian who believes there are some choices that are right and others that are wrong, exposing children to these sinful choices is an added disaster. I cry out to God for them. "You could deliver them. Will you? Do you care enough? I know that you do - more than I could. I fear for them, Father. They are so tender. They did not choose any of this pain."

There are no guarantees of course that a Christian home will produce spiritually healthy people. I have known many people who have had the benefit of a great Christian heritage (including Judy who had a saintly grandmother) but who rejected faith. Many others have come from a very unwholesome environment and have been great servants of Christ. Being nurtured in a Christian home honors and loves God is a very real advantage.

It is some comfort to think of biblical characters who experienced rough beginnings. Samuel was dedicated to the Lord by his mother to serve in the temple. There he lived in what was apparently a very immoral environment. Daniel matured in a foreign land. Joseph experienced slavery. Esther had a less than ideal world. But each grew up to make a difference in their generation for God.

The children are gifts from God. If they are no longer in my life as I would like, I can only remind myself that they are still Yours. You have loaned them to us as parents for a short time. But I would like to renegotiate that loan God. Just kidding around. I miss them.

Graduating To Grade One

There were so few hours in a month that I was with my children. Four days every other week was such a change from the joy of being with them every day. Ted and Michelle were so special.

Now, I had Judy's imposed new world order to contend with. It was not a new world order -it got old very quickly. The opportunity for me to be with the children always met with an unequivocal "yes" from me. She did not respond to my initiative for extra time. It was only if she needed me to care for them that she gave us extra time. I was an incompetent parent who had no interest in the children unless she needed a baby sitter. Then magically transformed I am "the acceptable alternative". I could change into Super Dad without even entering a phone booth.

One area of contact that she could not control was volunteering as a teacher's helper at school. So, almost ten years after college I went back to kindergarten every other week for a morning. I remembered why I had enjoyed school so much. My kindergarten experience had been a great beginning. Ted was also in a great class with a teacher, Mrs. Parker, who really cared. That was a special gift for him to receive as he began his education.

It was strange to walk into an elementary school again after so many years. Memory still sees that world from the perspective of a student. The halls were big. The desks were huge. It was a big pond for such little pollywogs. Now having been in some pretty large oceans since then made this feel like you were visiting a dollhouse full of miniatures.

The routines in Mrs. Parker's class provided familiar experiences to reassure this class of high-energy sources. The comfort of the predictable gave the students the courage to explore the strangeness of the new. I gained a renewed appreciation for teachers in our world today. The children are so needy emotionally.

They hunger for attention and affirmation in their uncertain existence when so much is conditional. Managing the behavior of these twenty-two children was a major challenge. It was easier because these kids had a teacher who really cared about them.

So, there I was sitting on the floor surrounded by these little dynamos. I think that the cartoon character "the Tasmanian Devil" must have been in kindergarten. They were so eager to learn and test this new world around them. Each day brought first time experiences with what we in the grown up world take for granted. Whether it was bouncing a ball in the gym or slathering paint on their hands on its way to paper, they had gusto.

There were times that I wondered how Mrs. Parker kept a smile and friendly tone, as the children would swarm to the various centers in the room. I would visit the third heaven as I entered the classroom and had a huge smile and hug from my son. Ted was able to enjoy me being there without clinging. When he wanted a hug or to whisper a secret to me, he felt free to initiate. But he was able to share me with the other children who came up for a hug or who wanted to sit beside me in our circle times.

Creating worlds in the sandbox, reading books, doing crafts and just watching them play was such a treat for me. But as I watched how needy some of the children felt and as I thought how many multiplied families were experiencing this rip in the fabric of life that a broken home causes, it made me sad.

Oh, God, who will heal this disease which has infected so many? I could do a little as I helped in that class of twenty-two. It was a privilege to spend extra time with Ted but also to serve the other children as well. So much potential exists in these young lives. So much joy but so much pain, God.

As I would look into their eyes, I would wonder what life would hold for them. Would they be happy? Would they find peace? Their hope would be in a relationship with God. At the end of June, I watched Ted march over to Mrs. Parker to receive a diploma and a hug. Both the paper and the embrace spoke eloquently of what it had meant to be in her class and why she was such a good teacher.

Along with Ted, I now graduated to grade one. It had been fun to be a kindergartener again.

A View From The Basket

Heavenly Father, it's me again. Oh, I am so tired of it all right now. It has been so long and I have a lifetime to go. How about letting me in on a secret, God? How long is my lifetime? I guess I should ask first - will this get any better? That would help me decide whether a long life left is the good news or the bad news. If it is going to be like this, forget it. I have had enough, thanks. As you already knew, God, this is a view from the basket from one of your most persistent basket cases.

The kids are missing again. My life swings up and down so dramatically when they are here or there. I can imagine what it must be like for them. Give them grace, Father. How should I have answered Michelle's question yesterday? "Is God mad at Mommy?" "It's a tough question when you are doing dishes. When I asked her why she asked, she explained that she wanted to know if God was mad at Mommy because she was not living with daddy any more. The children have seen so many changes in her. They have to deal with her new boyfriend while they are there. They are torn between two homes. What do you feel about Judy, Father?"

I know that I have such a range of feelings toward her. I can be so angry with her. She has become a black hole that absorbs all the joy and light around her with none reflected out in my galaxy. While she is busy taking care of herself, she has created a rip in the fabric of the universe. The anger is not constructive. I can still miss her (oops - I am not to admit that - haven't got on with my life). I left out that important qualifier - I miss the old Judy. But that needs a further qualifier - the Judy, I thought I knew. Too much time spent with lawyers and psychologists - it leads you to only tentative statements about everything.

The best I ever am able to do is a neutral response toward her. It sounds something like "She has made her choices - I am no longer responsible for what happens to her." I do not wish her well in her new life. Is that because it would feel like she was right, Father? There are many psalms to remind me that how life appears to be going is no indication of the quality of our relationship with you, God. Does she qualify as an enemy for me to bless? What do you think about her, Father?

I told Michelle "God is not mad at Mommy but he is sad when we do things that hurt other people. That's why we love other people and try to help them. God loves us, Michelle. God loves Mommy. God loves daddy. God loves you Michelle. God always loves us no matter what we do but it makes God sad when we hurt other people." I do not want Michelle to grow up feeling that you are an angry God. She sees so much pain. More than half her life has been in a broken home. At three years old, she has no memory of what it was like to be in a home where her parents loved her and loved each other.

Our divorced state is an ongoing statement of rejection. Perhaps that is what can zap me so easily. Is that how you feel, God, when we are out of fellowship with you? Do you sense each moment that in our focus on self first that it is a rejection of your love? Is this what it is like as you deal with a planet of people who have rejected the gospel of love? I think I would have been willing to die for the Judy, I knew and loved. While it seems that I have already died a thousand deaths because of the new Judy, I doubt that I have the mercy to die for her now.

Your grace is amazing, Lord. You died for me while I was your enemy. I have never been in a war, Father, so perhaps enemy is an ultimate term. Your love speaks to me as I think that you died me while I had divorced you by my choice to sin. Paraphrasing, “while we were still divorced from Him, Christ died for us.” That is powerful to me God. In spite of our life of rejection of you and your love, you gave yourself for us.

As I live my life in Judy’s rejection, I begin to appreciate how deep love can be. I need your grace, Father. I am not only not up to the battle, I am not up to the moments.

Please help me, Father. I do not like what I see.

It is still a view from the basket.

When Your Dog Smiles...

My dog and the social worker at my lawyer's office have never met. The law firm gave excellent service through this ordeal. They have been professional and genuinely concerned about my well being and particularly the needs of the children at every turn of my situation.

One of the resources of the firm has been a social worker. With her extensive experience in child assessment and child protection cases, she really helped. They repeatedly said that while I was their client, their priority is the welfare of the children. If at any time there might come a decision I wanted were not in the best interests of the children, they would insist on the children's needs first. I respected that very much. Their experience helped me to understand some of the dynamics of this situation when compared to others. This social worker had been particularly important in the frequent crisis moments that our circumstances prompted.

Early on in my association with the firm, we discussed the dog. It had been one of those frequent occasions when Toffee had overstayed her welcome. The social worker's advice was to keep the dog since it represented continuity for the children. During a time of so much loss for them, it was important to not take away anything avoidable. After my conversation, I looked at the dog sitting in her basket. I was sure that I could see her smiling at me. It wasn't a broad toothy smile, just a knowing smirk.

Toffee had come as a puppy a few weeks old to our newlywed home. Later, she had been with us in the little converted summer cabin which had become our first home. We were serving a small town church in a rural area where I was the assistant pastor. Toffee had been the pastor's dog at that church when we moved into a small house that we built. It had been on a road by the lake with bush behind our large rural lot. There were so many birds.

Later, it was a move to the city as I began my work in the financial field. The little town house was a change for Toffee. But as usual, she adapted. Then came our home in a new subdivision. It was an ideal family picture for us - one that I expected to reshoot year after year for many years. That was then.

In the post-separation period, the old rental house in the new community where Judy and the children had moved, Toffee was not a happy dog. She howled. She had accidents. She barked and barked. The dog was a real pain.

Toffee was no fool. I have looked through my checking account, my phone log and my courier slips. Somewhere, there must be evidence. The dog must have been in touch with my lawyer's office. There must have been a payoff to get my social worker to insist that the dog should stay. When I confronted Toffee about it, she just smiled.

Who's Got The Problem?

Christmas time is loaded with emotion for anyone jolted by love. Christmas becomes even more difficult when broken families face more decisions than at other times of the year. It's a big problem. Who's got the problem?

What will the Christmas schedule be with the children? Who will be with the children on Christmas Eve? What about Christmas morning? On the holidays, what happens to the children while one parent is working? Does the other parent pick up the time?

Then there are the concerts at school and daycare. There you sit with the other parent in the same room. You are there to watch your children share what they have practiced for so long. It is really tough to focus on them while Judy is present with her current boyfriend. How are the children to cope with these two worlds in collision? At Ted's concert, Michelle kept wanting to go from one parent to the other all evening. She was torn.

The pain of watching her confusion and insecurity makes me so angry. Why does she have to suffer this? There are so many consequences for them. Michelle did not have a choice. Neither did Ted. Two days in a row, Judy's boyfriend at these events confronts me. He is not a wholesome influence for the children either.

He fits the pattern and is a very clear reflection of how far into La-La land Judy has gone. Do I talk to him? Do we pretend that this is all very civilized and adult?

The likelihood is that Judy will go through several of these types of relationships as she passes through these phases of her new life. What is my responsibility to these people? Do I need to deal with each on that latches on to Judy over the coming years?

How do I avoid "Hello" from turning into a very clear expression of my feelings about what they are doing to God's children? He is yet another marr on her life.

I pray with the children in the car on the way to her home. I always include, "keep them from evil". Prayer remains.

In the short term, it is a real problem for me to cope with her choices in which I have no say. In the long term, she will answer for her choices. Then who will have the problem?

Joy In The Strangest Places

During the separation period, my kitchen was haunted. It was the ghost from kitchens' past. While this old house's kitchen did not at all resemble any of the kitchens of my childhood or marriage, it was an especially emotional place.

Perhaps it is because food conjures up so many images of family and comfort that the association is so strong. There was always something so soothing when I would walk into the house on a cool day and smell dinner cooking. As the aroma of roast beef or pumpkin pie floated in the air it would bring a smile of delight to a child coming home from church or school.

Judy was an excellent cook and baked many wonderful desserts. Life was good in her kitchen. In high school days and later at college, I had some domestic experience including cooking. During our marriage, I helped out with different meals but I was usually the one doing the BBQ. I also baked the ancient family shortbread from a recipe from my great-grandfather in Scotland.

Early in the separation, it was a challenge to boil water. It was easy to lose weight since I had neither an appetite nor the interest in making food. It was a "crashed diet" and it worked well. I do not recommend it. As time went on, it became easier and easier to get the kitchen working. I would save up my emotional energy for when the children were to be with me. Then we would cook.

There were a number of challenges in the process. After Judy left, she and hers came on three different occasions to take what she wanted from our home. It was usually when I was with the children and we were informed when to be out of the house. On one occasion we returned at suppertime to find only one set of knife, fork and spoon, and one pot. All the other useful kitchen items disappeared.

Perhaps because of the sentimental attachments, all that remained were the fine china, crystal and silver. It was quite a sight to see us eating Kraft dinner off such elegant place settings. I returned the pot and flatware to Judy by saying, "You forgot these."

So as I would begin to try to cook, I would find all sorts of essentials I needed for the meal that I did not have. Ingredients that I assumed to be there were not and so were the cooking utensils. I learned the fine culinary art of improvisation. The children were very tolerant. Some of the best times for me have been cooking or baking with Michelle. Ted likes to help too but Michelle really enjoys the processes involved. She giggles with glee as we pour a cake mix into a bowl. Stirring is usually a messy business with her. I look through her three-year-old eyes and see the wonderment of these early experiences. She likes to use the sprayer to rinse the dishes so I should wear my raincoat when it is time to tackle them.

We basted a turkey at Thanksgiving. Both she and Ted desperately wanted to use the “squeezy thing” to squirt the juice on the bird. Thankfully there was lots of liquid to use. We make pancakes with hot dog eyes, nose and mouth. Last weekend we played “Off with their heads!” where soft-boiled eggs were opened with great ceremony.

I wonder how many memories are created for them by these experiences? What smells will lock deep in their emotions as they think back about growing up in this house?

Dishes are still a royal pain. A dishwasher is such a good idea. The ghost of kitchen’s past know longer haunt me, they remind me of happy times. My kitchen is no longer a foreign place. In some ways, it is a place of victory since it was like enemy territory for so long. But now it is a place where good things happen.

Me a cook? Ha! Like so many of the more incredible experiences of this new world for me, I surprise myself by answering, “Yes!”.

The great chefs of Europe have nothing to fear from my competition- for the moment. The kitchen has become a place of joy. I continue to find joy in the strangest places.

Once Upon A Time...

Each evening that Ted and Michelle are with me ends with our special story ritual. I enjoyed many bedtime stories as a child where my father would begin with a familiar start and with the same characters - two horses "Tony & Betsy". We would then journey into the land of imagination. It was a great gift to us as children.

While I love to read a wide range of children's literature with my kids, I have continued this tradition of imagination. We begin each story with what has become our own oral tradition.

"Once upon a time, in a land far away, in a time long ago, in a castle by the sea, there lived a great queen named Michelle, and a great king named Ted...." From there any adventure might await.

In a twinkling of an eye we transport to our very own mythical world where we can risk dreams. The children are my fellow travelers in the story. We explore the world together. Each feels free to add ideas about what might happen next in our tale. It begins to look like the long and winding trail of dominos. The experience is always unique.

Ironically this nightly visit to our castle has taught me more about the children than any other activity we do together. As I lie beside this three and six-year-old with the lights dimmed, I visit their imagination. There I can learn more about what their fears and joys are.

We can create and exile (usually to Spider Island) the bad guys that our noble characters might face in a forest, at sea or in a field. We encounter friends known and new who aid us on our quests or who just brighten our journey. They add and change our story in the making. Their contributions are enlightening. Usually, they add to the natural progressions of the story.

Sometimes they share gems about what is going on inside their soul. It might be a distinction like Michelle saying, "There is an extra seat in our canoe but no one is sitting there." "Whose spot is that?" I ask? "That's Mommy's but she isn't in our stories anymore." my daughter would explain. "I want to keep Mommy at the castle so she doesn't go away." "I want you to be with us in our story, Daddy. Daddy is always in our stories."

The need for enemies or sometimes the need for only friends gives me clues about where they are at emotionally. Their enthusiasm is contagious and makes these times so special.

Occasionally, when I call them at Judy's or if he is not feeling well, Ted wants me to tell him a bedtime story. He draws some comfort and strength from the visiting our other

world together. There are times when our story prompts a question about God or life. We pause to talk about what is on their mind.

It may be simple or it might be one of those many profound questions that kids ask and parents admit that they do not know. Our transitions between the two worlds are easy. As with so much of our learning experience, the teaching opportunities happen as we “sit at home, walk along the road, lie down, rise up...”

At the end of our story we always end up back at the castle safe and sound. Our king and queen and their friends end their tale by having a cup of cocoa and some cinnamon toast. Then they fall fast asleep secure within the tall walls of our castle by the sea. King Ted and Queen Michelle will awake again with the magic words, “Once upon a time...”

Maraversaries

Father, I need some time tonight. I guess that I should rephrase that since time is a human problem. I need to give you some extra time tonight. Time is on my mind right now. I can't help it. I am at one of those anniversaries again today. Anniversary is probably the wrong word. That reminds me of a happy milestone. It has been two years since Judy left. What was that place in the wilderness called by Moses...Mara. Yes, that was it. It meant bitter. Mara was a place of bitterness where you turned their bitter water into sweet water to satisfy a nation's thirst. I'll coin a new word - my maraversary.

I feel bitter tonight, God. I am still drinking from a very bitter pool of water here. It has been two years, Father. Two years and one day ago my life was so different. Now locked in a battle for my spiritual, emotional, mental and physical survival, I despair. I have so many pressure points that it is easier to talk about what is going well. That's because there are so few bits of good news that it doesn't take long to go through that list.

We are half way through the family psychological assessment. I do not know whether Ted and Michelle will be coming back to this as their home or whether condemned, they will live with Judy. Her new life exposes them to value system and lifestyle that is the antithesis of what the old Judy believed. Her life is marred in so many ways. I am not sure what is going to happen. She has the status quo in her favor. Because I did not play hardball but tried to reconcile, I have a huge obstacle to overcome. It is not enough to be as good a parent as she is or even a better parent for our children. I must be so significantly better than her for the kids that it warrants changing the present arrangements and disrupting the status quo.

Will a secular psychologist and court system recognize the differences between us and how it would impact these children for the rest of their lives? I am relying on your sovereignty, God. It is, like so much over the past two years, not my choice.

The way life has gone it is so hard to hope for happy outcomes. Father, there has been some encouragement in this process. So many friends have taken the time and the energy to be involved in the assessment. It is not an easy experience. Besides just going to the city to meet at the psychologist's office for an hour, it is a draining time. There you begin to talk about your relationships, perspectives and opinions on Judy, Terry, Ted and Michelle. Who are they? What are they like? How are the kids doing? It is all tough stuff when you are talking about old friends or family. These friends are willing to pay the price of involvement. They care about our children and both of us.

Today, Father, it just hurts. I do not want to be here anymore. When will you turn this bitter water sweet again for me? Quench this thirsting of my soul. It is like I have wandered in this wilderness for forty years. I drink of life's cup tonight on this maraversary. It is still a bitter taste. I need your miracle God.

Resetting Your Clock

Anyone who has traveled great distances by plane knows the joy of jet lag. Being five or six time zones east or west of home forces your body into some strange changes. You want to sleep in the middle of the day (at least more than usual...) and eat dinner in the middle of the night. Our body has its own internal clock that allows our systems to operate effectively. In a different time zone we have to reset our body clock.

Socially, we all have an internal clock too. We have times of the day when we see other people. Certain days of the week have routines that are normal for us - like Sunday and church. One of the adjustments on a vacation is the change in routines. That's why many people need a couple of days before they "really relax" on a holiday. They have not reset their clocks yet.

One of the most powerful internal routines that God has given us is our parent clock. Parenting is a special relationship and opportunity that impacts another life. Deep inside of most of us is a need to parent when we have children. Separation and divorce does not change that.

In an intact home, you normally see the kids in the morning through the day if they/you are home and after school you begin the evening together. Saturdays and Sundays allow for more time. These basic patterns continue until the children become teens and increase their independence. After they leave home for college or marriage the parenting role goes through another set of changes. The pain of those changes is called the "empty nest syndrome."

But for the parent who has faced a separation or divorce, there will be many days without the children. Especially if you are the one with limited access.

I thoroughly enjoyed the prospect of having children. When we were blessed with Ted and a couple of years later Michelle, I was thrilled. Parenting is a strange time of wonder as you observe first hand this life forming, growing and taking shape. So many changes happen so quickly as they develop in the first months of life. Then as they begin to walk and talk you can only be amazed by the speed at which they explore their world.

Part of the awe of parenting is that you are able to gain some insight into what your earliest experiences (usually forgotten) were as you began life. It certainly gives you a renewed appreciation of what your parents went through to provide and care for you as a child. (Thanks Mom & Dad!)

When those parenting times go from every day to two days out of fourteen you suffer parent-lag. Your God-given instinct to parent is frustrated because you are so seldom with the children. In hostile situations like mine, you do not even have contact with the children except “on your days.” You are expected to turn off the parent inside yourself.

How do we reset our parenting clocks? The first thing that I did was to decide make the most of the times I was with them. I was going to be a real parent and friend to my children when it was our time to be together. I could always pray for them no matter where they were. My prayer life had never been so focused.

After that came to choice to be available for them whenever they were available to me. In almost five years since the separation, I have never given up an access time or turned down an opportunity for more time. There were times that I was offered extra days. I canceled appointments to be available.

The next step was to think of ways that I could participate in their life when it was not my time. I called them by agreement every night at 7:00 p.m. for a five-minute phone visit. No matter where I was or what I was doing, I always called whether or not they were there to receive the call.

I would send them stickers every week for a sticker book. As a parent, I volunteered to help out in their kindergarten and grade one classes every other week for a morning. If there were field trips, I was on the list as a volunteer.

Finally I concentrated on being the best person I could be so that when we were together, I had the most to offer them as a person. This allowed me to reset my clock to hang on until it was my time to be with them. I was not always with Ted and Michelle but I was always the father who loved them.

Tic-Tac-Toe

Ted is at an age where he is learning some of the basic games that occupy children. It is fun for me to explore so many of these first experiences again. At six, the world is so full of new adventures and untried pleasures of learning. He has the advantage of being able to enjoy the world of computers as well. At four, he could boot the computer and load some of his Sesame Street games. It was great.

In spite of his increasing sophistication, he still found some very basic games fun too. We enjoyed playing “One, two, three” where our hands would become paper, pencils, rocks, water, fire or scissors. His laughter was enchanting.

Eventually, we played tic-tac-toe. It is one of those simple games that can save a single parent in church when a child is bored. It is an exciting game for him. Ted loves to draw that straight line through his three in a row. Adults do not play many tic-tac-toes. There is a simple reason. When played thoughtfully, you learn that the best you can every do it a tie. You cannot win.

Ted has not learned that yet. I enjoy letting him win as well as the occasional tie and loss. To him, tic-tac-toe is still a game that you can win. It took me more than a year to learn that trying to communicate effectively with Judy was another version of tic-tac-toe. Try as I might, I could never feel like she understood what I was trying to communicate to her. She treated openness as part of a grand plot to manipulate her. Suspicions have made it impossible to deal with her adult to adult.

I have had to learn that such efforts were futile. The best you could hope for was a stalemate. Even using the mediation process could not help. The mediator was not successful in reaching her either. It has been small consolation to know that it is not my ability to communicate.

Her earliest statement that she just “needed space” was like taking the phone off the hook while taking a nap. At some point, she ripped the phone out of the wall. Only God knows when this happened and only he can repair this damage. Others and I have reported to heaven “trouble on the line”. But the phone is down.

Bing, my former pastor, said early on that to communicate more than basic facts to the new Judy, all I could be sure about was that I would be misunderstood. He was so right. I have had to stop trying to play tic-tac-toe.

Toffee Speaks

Thatz it. I didnt think it wood work. It is hardr to lode Dos than I thot. Mi nam is Toffee. I am hiz dog. He iz sleping now so I wantd to speek. (gud dog pun, huh?). Plez do not mind mi speling. I nevr went to skool. I have just wached Ted do hiz fonics. It iz hard to get mi paz to push thez litel kez.

I kam to liv with the Frazrs when I waz a few weekz old. I liked living at ther first houz with the wud stov. (The onli time I did not lik it waz wen I chud some boots and chers-woof - did I get it!).

I likd livng with the Frazrs. I remembr how much the Admiral (mi nicknam for mastr) and Judy luvd each othr. We had lotz of vizitrs in our home. (Sometimes ther wer kids who puld mi tal). Pepl who wer havng problmz often staid with us ovrnit or for som daz. Judy tuk gud kar of them and they takd with the Admiral alot. Pepl likd to kom to our hus.

We movd into a new hus. I likd it best becuse I kud run in the big bakyard and explor the wuds out back. We wer klos to the lak. Sometimz I would go down to the lak for a swim or to lok for frogz. Then we wer in a smal plaz with lots of kars arond and a smal backyard. I did not like it ther much. But whil we wer ther, Judy brot home one and then two of these small wigli things.

They lovd them alot. But I wasn't sure I likd them. Sometimes they smeld awful and they made funi noises. They kept getting biggr. Now they are Ted and Michelle. I like them alot -even when they puld my ears. They give me more biscuits than the Admiral does. My favorit plasz to visit are the cabn by the lak and grandma and grandpas house (my best friend Smoky lives ther). I luv to go to the cabin because I can swim, go in the boat, run in the forest, and smell lots of neet things.

We moved to a big house. I likd it ther because ther wer lots of rooms for me to visit. I could sleep by the fire places or in my basket in a big closet. There were lots of windows to look out and a big back yard. I sometimes went to the kennl when they went far away. I do not lik the kennl.

This time when Terry got me, he looked very upset. When I cam hom, I saw that nobodi else was there. The Admiral would cry alot. I never saw him so upset. He would talk on the phone alot. He was very sad and did not sleep. He told me Judy had gone away. One day Ted and Michelle cam back. That was better. But the Admiral was still unhappy. When would Judy cum back? I watched out the window alot for her. Then one day she came back with sum guys. They took alot of stuff out of the house.

Then we moved again. It is a house with alot of wood. I don't like it as much. The Admiral was very sad for a long tim. He says it is a divorz. I like it best when the kids cum. The other days I like it are when people visit-especially Gerry. He is my friend. I hav seen Judy a coupl of timz when we have cum back from the cottage. I barkd at her one time real loud. She is not the same Judy. I don't know what a divorz really is but it is a bad thing.

Everybody has been very sad. Ted and Michelle cried al ot too. I wondr what will happn next. I am an old dog now. I sleep alot. Things are better now. Well, I should go before the Admiral comz down and catchz me uzing the computr. (I like some of the gamz too). Toffee.

How Do You Spell Relief?

It seems like a whirlpool of events has sucked me down in its vortex. As I hear the sound of its suction I wonder what awaits me on the other side of this drain. Will I find any relief from this helpless feeling going around and around? How do you spell relief? I used to know.

Now dizziness has taken over. The psychologist's assessment is due soon. It is expected to form the basis of the custody of the children. I have no idea how it will go.

Will I have the children free from the unwholesome environment? How long will they suffer like this?

I am ruined financially. As I began the custody process the risks were great. It was clear that it would be prolonged by Judy and that in such a battle, time is money. With the recession and my own depression, it would merely be a matter of time before the financial end would come. I could only hope to survive long enough to liberate the children.

I have had lots of money. I had seen weeks where I could not pay the electric bill. I have had large bank accounts. I have had debt. Now, all of my assets were gone and I had debt larger than most people's mortgage. Bankruptcy waits in the near future.

I have endured creditor letters and eviction notices from this rented house. I have lost my phone and what little dignity I have left.

All that remains is an ounce of integrity. It is an ounce to last until I speak to my grownup children. Regardless of how the custody turns out, I will be able to look them in the eyes and say that I gave all I could to help them.

My reputation is in tatters. I have learned long ago that a reputation is a fragile commodity always out of our grasp. It is subject to the will of others.

No wife. No children. No reputation. No money. No energy.

Oh, God, I am so tired. It has been two years of agony.

I am so weary of this battle.

I need relief soon, Father.

How do you spell relief?

Munchkin Magic

Like Peter Pan, I never wanted to grow up. It was a magical time for me full of many happy experiences. Some of my friends could not wait to become an adult. Then they could be baseball stars or fire fighters. I enjoyed being one of the little people.

Now as my little people or “munchkins” are in my life, I remember my own childhood. They provide the munchkin magic. So much of our memories are the special moments. I am no friend of winter. I often joked at our first church that if God wanted to bless me, he would send me to Hawaii. If he wanted to punish me, he would send us to Alaska. When asked what this northern church represented? My answer was “A warning!”.

The separation began in the winter. With real effort, I would resist the temptation to hibernate with the children in our home. We had a favorite place to go tobogganing. It was a hill which was steep enough to speed the three of us down through the spraying snow. Michelle in her two-year-old vocabulary called it “bobogganing”. Two years later they still laugh about one of the runs down the hill when daddy’s black “Crocodile Dundee” hat blew off. In the course of human history this is not a big moment. But for the three of us, this was a magic moment.

The commuter train line goes near this rented home. The children and I have always enjoyed trains. For me it was the Lionel set and the big trains near grandma’s house where I would watch the freights shunt with a loud crash.

For them, it was grandpa’s model trains in the basement. Our commuter train would pass at 6:05 p.m. and on the weekdays when the children were with me, we would choose any of the many crossings where the train would pass. With the car windows down or sitting by the crossing, we listen for the sound of the coming whistle. Then we would watch for the engine’s lights. It was a contest to see who could see them first. The flashing lights on the crossing and the roar of the passing engine would bring a wave at the engineer.

He would give a special toot to the man and the two children shouting a greeting. Did he know what we represented as he passed? Did he know that this was a broken family trying to build some memories?

Finding a “safe place” was especially important in the earliest days. I needed to be in a place where we would not meet people we knew. My attention was to be on the children and encounters with others meant my focus was dealing with them not Ted and Michelle. This became less of a problem in later months but in the earliest times I will always be grateful for a park in a small town thirty minutes north of us. There was a great playground and the trains went around the bay beside the park. In good weather, the bay was full of sailboats and swimmers. It was a special place for us to go. We made memories there that live on today.

There is a renewal of spirit that comes when you see children exploring their world. Ted is learning to read and as he sounds out the words, you sense the wonder of language. As the choir sings, Michelle likes to direct the music from the back of the auditorium. Her waving hands express her enthusiasm for the beauty of music.

I pray each morning and night for my Ted and Michelle and as they come to mind during the day. I love them so much. Their munchkin magic is such a source of joy.

System Crash

Those who have a computer with a hard drive know the great fear of a crash. For those without a computer, let me explain. The hard drive is where the files and programs are stored within a computer. It is the memory bank. At some point, every hard drive will crash or fail. The scary thing is that it is a “when” not an “if”. It is sometimes caused mechanically or through a programming problem. But when it fails, the breakdown affects your ability to use the computer.

As tough as that is for a person using a computer, when a system involving people fails, lives are changed. The area of family law is an extremely complex and troubled system. For many that find themselves in the process they experience system failure. I have had the benefit of three attorneys over the five years of my ordeal. Each one has been a real asset to me as I have waded through the mess.

My first lawyer was chosen on a recommendation as a conciliatory attorney who tries to avoid the escalation of the case. She worked out the original joint-custody agreement but was unable to get an agreement that covered more than a few months. Her follow-up was an oral agreement with Judy’s lawyer that a further agreement would be made following the summer.

The first lesson is that if it is not on paper - it does not exist.

It took almost three years to obtain an agreement that replaced that temporary and incomplete first agreement. In the meantime, I was hostage to Judy’s whims and control over all the matters that were not covered by the initial joint-custody agreement.

One of the difficulties for a Christian confronting the legal system is that you believe that there is integrity in the system. My lawyer dealt in good faith but that does not assume that the other side will operate on the same basis.

Further there is in an area as complex as family law great room for misunderstanding and misinterpretation - intentional and unintentional. The words of Jesus to be as “wise as serpents and as harmless as doves” certainly applies. (I’ll resist the obvious temptation to make a comment about snakes in the system...).

Sadly, this is a process where it is important to be alert and to realize that we are dealing with a very imperfect system. When a spouse retains a lawyer, the other spouse needs to do so immediately. Early decisions create what is called the “status quo”. This idea of keeping what is becomes the most powerful indicator for the future. Once one side has retained a lawyer, the other spouse should do so immediately.

While it is true that lawyers entering a case escalate the conflict, the practical alternative is to be steam-rolled. This is not usually in the best interests of the children. Sadly the more cooperative and tender spouse tends to be more vulnerable.

A good lawyer will make a huge difference to your case. But do not assume that they can do everything for you. Ask them very specifically what things you can do to improve your chances of success in the custody process.

I learned early on that taking notes and logging information is very important. After you have been with the children, make notes on any problems or concerns that you have. When communicating with your lawyer or other agencies, make notes on all of the meetings so that you are clear on what was decided. Paper trails are a pain but no paper trail means you are lost.

It is amazing how much happens over a period of years as your custody matters are being settled. Records are an important resource in presenting your side of the case. You may find the need to put in note form information to your ex-spouse as well. This can avoid misunderstanding and miscommunication that is so easy when you and they are stressed. Computers will crash. That's why we back up our files on small diskettes. The court systems will probably fail you too - especially in the short term. Using your lawyer effectively and writing down up your information will help protect you and your children when a crash comes.

Chickens, Eggs, and Roosters

What came first the chicken or the egg?

It is an old question. But what about the rooster? The question assumes that a chicken - read "hen" since it does the laying- and the egg are the only options. Without the rooster the egg is only good for cooking and the hen will only produce uneventful eggs. Sadly, the custody process also assumes that the focus is either mothers or children. Too often, fathers are not considered as a serious alternative to caring for their children.

The false assumption of the system is that it is mothers who nurture and fathers who are to have occasional visitation.

The story of Mrs. Doubtfire only scratches the surface of how dysfunctional the system is when it comes to parents and their children. This is especially true of the fathers in the equation. There are some small signs of change here. But it is time that parents were assessed on the basis of their parenting skill rather than their gender.

Parents (usually fathers) who have been with their children every day are suddenly faced with their contact being restricted to every other weekend. With the prejudice (now slowly changing) of the courts in favor of mothers for custody, the controlling ex-wife has real advantages. Built in to the assumptions of a demanding ex is that they are the better parent and the children will be better off under their control. But often these same controlling spouses actually put the children way down their list of priorities when it comes to spending their free time and energy. This is a natural result from the fact that the real motivation is not the best interests of the children - just the worst interests of the ex.

Part of the reason that fathers are presumed less fit to parent is the need for easy answers. Overburdened and understaffed, agencies and courts are looking for neat and tidy solutions to messy custody cases. If they can find a quick answer they have moved on to the next case. It is much more difficult to really attempt to assess who is the better parent.

Once again, the issue of the status quo becomes important. If, as in my case, a wife left the marriage and the husband attempted to reconcile, the wife has a lot of clout. Typically the wife can have short-term custody if she wants because the husband is trying to be cooperative in order to reconcile. But once the pattern is established, then courts and agencies are reluctant to make any changes because it would be disruptive to the children. The new test is no longer who is the better parent but is one so terrible that it warrants changing the children's arrangements? Once again the advantage goes to the one who severs the relationship.

As with all prejudice, it is easy to generalize about a group and make everyone fit that mold. Many fathers do neglect their children and do not value their access opportunities. But many fathers are as nurturing or are more so than their ex-wife. Those fathers should be given the freedom to parent without regard to the fact that they are men.

All I have asked is that I be treated as a parent. No more and no less. But we operate in a system that goes beyond that test and asks whether or not you are a father or a mother. So the next time someone asks about the chicken or the egg, remind them that you need a rooster and a hen to have eggs that grow.

Of Giants And Other Parents

There was a great children's program which was part of my childhood called "The Friendly Giant". It featured Wisconsin's Bob Homme who was the giant. He lived in a castle but we usually met him by the farm, town or meadow of miniatures. Then we would see "the boot".

This huge boot in this little world. He would announce to us that he would go ahead over to the castle and lower the drawbridge and open the big front doors so we could visit him. To the music of "Early one morning" we were welcomed into the castle. He then would give us a choice of places to sit. There was a "chair for one of you, a big armchair for two to curl up and a rocking chair for one who likes to rock." (Ted likes the big armchair and Michelle prefers to rock.) His massive hand gently arranged the tiny chairs by his fireplace. Then began our visit with Friendly and his castle family.

As a child there is great joy in the discovery of this huge world around us. So many experiences that adults do with ease and without thought seem overwhelming to smaller people. In many ways, parents are the giants in their children's lives.

How do we continue to be "Friendly Giants" with our children as we face our huge adult problems in a single parent role?

There are days when particular events fly like arrows against us. It might be a phone call from your lawyer or the pressures of work where you feel like the nasty giants are attacking you. Problems can not be ignored and the timing of a crisis usually matches when you have the children.

With too much experience with nasty giants, I have found some things that have kept me friendly with the children.

Continuing with the castle theme, guard the castle door. While the children are with you, decide to protect them from the adult problems that you must face. If it is a tough phone call or piece of mail, schedule it for a time when you are free to deal with it without the children present. Children of divorce have enough pain to contend with on their own. Don't involve them in your issues - especially if it involves their other parent. Take a firm and positive approach that tells the nasty giants when you will deal with them.

Equally important is the contact with other adults to share the burden with you. In your support circle of friends or in a support group, you can share some of the anger and pain you suffered from the intruders. Knowing that you can and will talk to someone about it will help you focus on the children.

Ask for God's grace to keep you positive. Many times when I had a fiery missile catapult over the castle wall, it was a quick prayer for help that quenched the flames.

Being a friendly giant does not mean that the children rule and you sit passively by. Children need boundaries and consistency in their life with you. But your choices and attitudes with them should be from a heart that is acting in love not reacting the nasty giants.

It seems that one of the perverse needs of many ex-spouses is to destroy the relationship of the children with their ex. No one benefits from involving the children in those battles. Make a mental decision that no matter how tough it gets you want to preserve your relationship with your children. Twenty years from now when they are giants too, you want to be able to look your children in the eyes with integrity.

So much of the view of God your children will form is based on their view of you as a parent. We need God's help to be able to model our faith consistently for our children.

Terrorist Ex

One of the scourges of society has always been terrorism. The terrorist is willing to risk their life to achieve their cause. They feed on the terror that they create. Counting on civilized people to be afraid of the extremes to which they will go they strike hard. In some cases these sociopaths have what psychologists call their “moral interpreter” damaged or perhaps even missing. They can torture and kill others with no remorse. Power achieved in the recognition and control they exercise gives them a real high. Whether their cause is religious fanaticism, political objectives or just old-fashioned greed it is the power that they crave. They do not care about their victims.

Sadly for children, there are custody terrorists at work as well in too many divorce cases. What is even more tragic is that these terrorists are the biological or step-parents of their victims. I have faced an ex-spouse who is a custody terrorist.

With an obsessive need to control their life they look for ways to neutralize and if possible destroy the ex-spouse. Unfortunately, the handy and vulnerable hostages are the children. The media is now exposing what agencies and those in the court systems have long known. Too many children are used by parents to get back at an ex-spouse. For those outside the process, the stories are too incredible to believe. But for those who have been the victim of a terrorist ex, the trauma is all to real.

A college professor of mine stated the truism about demanding people. If you give in to demanding people, they will only demand more. There will be no appreciation at what another gives up only a bitterness that they did not get more.

Often the attacks are motivated by a seething rage or just an overwhelming fear of being vulnerable. So whatever inhibitions might have been present before are set aside. Whatever they do is rationalized by the larger need to control or obliterate the ex-spouse. The short-term bias of the court and custody system is toward those who will be terrorists. In agencies and courts that are overwhelmed with cases, understaffed and underfunded the easy answer is to accommodate the demanding person. If one parent is cooperative, it is easier to nudge that parent to accommodate the demanding parent. If the demanding parent has the added advantage of being the mother then the answers are quite easy. Adopt the traditional models and let's get to the next case.

If the cooperative spouse has endurance and the benefit of a good lawyer, it is possible to overcome the status quo and end up with joint-custody or even custody.

The hope for the parents dealing with the terrorist is their own personal integrity. That does not guarantee that justice will always be done or that the best interests of the children will be served. But if the Christian perspective is an eternal one, the best hope for the children and a caring parent is to cooperate where it is possible and to stand firm against terrorists.

As Neville Chamberlain learned and as Winston Churchill knew someone who is bent on conflict will not be appeased by giving in a little. There are times when a negotiated settlement is the best result. It need not be a perfect agreement that contains everything that we want. That is the nature of negotiations. But it is a mistake to believe that as Christians we must accept, acquiesce and agree to every demand of the other parent. Being a parent gives us a greater responsibility to look at the best interests of the children. We might be happy to settle just to get the conflict over with. A settlement that is not faithful to the best interests of the children will never bring peace. Like Chamberlain, we might hold up an agreement saying "Peace in our time." But peace does not come through appeasement. Often it takes someone who like Churchill is unshakable about a basic sense of justice for others.

Part of being a Christian is taking a stand even in the face of great opposition if it is the right thing to do for those in our care. May we have the wisdom to know when to be peacemakers when it is best for the children. But if needed may we have the courage to be determined warriors when confronting those who would harm the children. It is the only way to deal with terrorists.

Cotton Candy

The good news of being a parent is that along with the concerns, pain and challenges there is also lots of fun. That applies to divorced parents as well. Ted and Michelle are delights for me. I am very proud of those two. (Please excuse the typical parental pride...) One of the reasons I look forward to being together with them is that it is fun! Call it the cotton candy part of being a parent.

One of the fascinating developments is a child's sense of humor. In the earliest stages, there is only a laugh because you laugh. They enjoy a pleasant surprise that explains the universal appeal of peak-a-boo. But slowly, they develop an awareness that other things are funny too.

Knock-Knock jokes are an early form of kids' humor. One of the daily challenges for me with Ted and Michelle was coming up with a joke of the day for each evening phone call.

Knock, knock. Who's there? Who? Who. Who? What are you - an owl?

Knock knock. Who's there? Ach. Ach Who? Bless you - you sneezed!

Knock knock. Who's there? Lettuce. Lettuce who? Lettuce in - it's raining!

There is nothing quite like the laughter of children. Whether it is swinging on a swing in the park or playing catch children can be totally in to what they are doing. With so many new experiences they can find everything you do an adventure.

Understanding this can help with some of the routines of life. When we were on our own, I and the children would sort socks together. (Socks are worthy of a whole book - entitled "The Unsolved Mystery of the Missing Sock" or "Why Do Washing Machines Eat Socks One At A Time?"). One of the rewards for the ordeal of trying to match these various shades and hues was a game. We would always end our sock sorting with "sock wars". (Warning- This of course only works if you roll your socks into balls - this should not be attempted with the merely folded variety.) Each of us would take our share of socks and find a fort behind a chair or couch. Then it would happen. Flying through the air would go all colors and sizes of socks. Squeals of laughter would enchant the room. Great exercise and great memories.

With all the pain of a separation and a divorce it is easy to not see beyond your own ache. But the children need the whole you - including your humor and enthusiasm.

After many access weekends in the darkest times I would sit in my big blue chair and collapse. My energy level was already low and I was adjusting to being alone. But somehow, I had the energy to participate fully with the children while they were with me. I had never thought of God's grace being so practical before this experience. But in very tangible ways, I was able to make a difference for the children when they were here. The children will probably never realize how difficult those days were for me. The only days that were tougher were they days they were not there. As with so much of the Christian life, you receive so much more when you are giving.

Those times when I seemed to be giving all to the children from my meager reserves were some of the richest moments for me as a parent. That is the encouragement for anyone else who is struggling. Allow God to take your weakness and inadequacy to make a difference for your children.

As a parent, take seriously the need for fun! It is an important opportunity to grow with your children. And invest in a good children's joke book!

Significant Preparation

There comes a point when you begin to feel like there is life after the custody battles - or at least a life with someone else while you endure the battles. Enter the “Significant Others”. But first - significant preparation!

After the ordeal of a lost marriage and usually nasty custody process, it takes some courage to think about another relationship. One thing is for sure - you want this new person to be “significantly other” than the previous spouse. But figuring all of that out is quite a challenge when you feel so emotionally bruised.

There is a healing time required for a person who has suffered any great loss whether through a death or a divorce. That healing allows you to understand more about your past experience.

The purpose is not only to learn from your mistakes but to allow the renewed you to enter a relationship rather than a wounded soldier with several limbs still dangling in the air. It is helpful to not force your prospective relationship to have to use too much imagination about you. “I wonder what he/she would be like if they were normal” is not a strong place to begin.

There is no question that you are a changed person after the trauma of your divorce. The custody process alone changes people dramatically. All these changes are neither good nor bad in themselves. But you are changed.

If you had a strong core of personality that was together before your divorce (even better if it was before your first wedding) than you can get back to that essential “you”. From there you can begin to see what changes have happened to you through the life experiences since your high school or college days. Self-awareness is key in your healing. You can heal. Whether or not you do depends on how well you know yourself and what tools you have available to do the repair work.

What choices do you want to make for your future? When are you ready to begin to look again at a life after this disaster? How can you trust again?

Unfortunately, too many people allow the intense loneliness and pain of the separation and divorce experience to push them into a quick relationship before they have completed the hard work of grieving the lost relationship. When children are involved, it is even more crucial that you are really ready to be open to the future.

For most people, the grieving process requires three years before entering a new relationship is wise. If you are like most people, you are probably quite sure that it will take you less time - especially if it has not been three years yet! Denial is a great help in the earliest shock period of a separation but it is a poison that dulls your senses if it is allowed to control you over time. There are ways to postpone grieving but you can not avoid it. Like a childhood disease, you are better to get the illness when you are a child. Contracting it in later life is much worse.

I know people who have postponed grieving their loss by jumping into a relationship quickly. Then when they finally let down their guard they have to grieve the lost relationship while in a new one. The premature connection with another person might not be a good match after the grief process is finished with you. Then you have even more trouble.

For me, I made a commitment once I had given up all but a fleeting hope that Judy would come back. My priority shifted from reconciliation with my spouse to my role as a parent for Michelle and Ted. That inevitably led to conflicts with Judy who had no interest in reconciliation. She had a very different parenting agenda for the children than our parenting together had been or my parenting values still were. The stranger Judy became, the easier the choices became.

For me, significant others would wait until the children's issues were resolved and not before I had gone through my own three years of healing. While I socialized, I would not be seeking a new relationship until then. As it turned out, it was three and a half years before things were settled.

Then I was ready. It had been a very long three and a half years. I was really ready ...and willing. With a stretch of my faith, I hoped that there would be good news for me after the doing what I needed to do for the children. There had been significant preparation and a significant other ... but that's another chapter!

The Dull Ache

If you or someone you know has arthritis, you know what a chronic pain can be like. It is never far away from your mind. Some people speak of noticing their arthritis only when they don't feel it. In milder forms it is not enough to debilitate a person just burden them. It is a dull ache.

For those who are parents of divorced children, you know about that dull ache. No matter what you may be doing, the ache of missing your children is never far away. The most inconsequential thing can remind you of the kids.

In a home, you walk by their rooms. The doors are closed. Opening one, you see the neatly arranged furniture, wall hangings and toys. Everything is here except the children who should be filling the air with their play. Today it is neat and tidy - and quiet. (I'll always trade tidy for their energy.)

As I would sit to eat my meal alone, I was conscious of the three empty chairs with their silent places. Only Toffee would sit beside the table also too weary to pay any attention to the pain that a dog felt when "her kids" were not around

For people with chronic pain, their nervous system changes after a period of time creating a permanent pathway of pain. For a parent separated from their child, an emotional pathway of pain is opened as well. It becomes a part of your life. No matter whether you are playing a sport, working, reading or watching television, the intrusion of that familiar ache is too well known.

As time passes you forget what it felt like without the pain. It seems like it has always been there. Despair enters when you come to believe that it will always be there too. Like an animal in a trap, you are alive but you know you will never get out of the trap sprung on you.

For many parents the feeling of being trapped prompts them to try to escape the dull ache. Some disappear to begin new life with no connection to their past or their children. Others consider abduction as a way out. This of course exchanges a dull ache for a fear pumped adrenaline as they live in fear of discovery. In very tragic and thankfully rare situations, some commit suicide with their children to end their hopelessness.

As with many other losses and crises of the human condition, no one that has not gone through a similar experience can truly understand what you feel like. Even then, everyone has different circumstances that make their situation unique. But that fact should not keep others from trying to sympathize with the parents or children of divorce. Nor should it make those of us in the experience close ourselves off to those trying to reach out to us. True they can not KNOW what we are feeling but they do KNOW what it is like to hurt. Give others the opportunity to share with you and to try to help carry the load.

Part of the frustration for chronic illness comes with the word “chronic”. It does not end. It may decrease or fade but you are not cured. These are not tonsils to be taken out or even a heart to be transplanted. This is a dull ache.

Friends will find it frustrating when they ask how you are doing because you can usually refer to the ache. It may be that you just saw the children or that you won’t see them for a while. More court experiences or another letter from the lawyer could be the response. But usually it can trace itself back to your “condition”. Lest we become too paranoid, all parents end up talking about their kids regularly. For us it is just a subject with high negatives as well as high positives.

Is it terminal? No. The dull ache of being the parent of divorced children is a chronic but not terminal condition. For some a reconciliation might happen to make the dull ache just a memory. For others, the condition will continue for a lifetime. Even when the children are grown up you will not replace those missed times together. The good news of the Christian faith is that there is an ultimate cure for the dull ache.

In eternity, we look forward to a place where God shall wipe away all our tears and end our dull aches.

Wow!

Good news. Can you stand it? There were many days and nights when I thought it was not something I would know again. I mean REALLY good news.

Having moved to a new town as we approached a custody agreement based on the family assessment, I was ready for a fresh start.

It was time to continue the rebuilding phase but on a new level. With the custody agreement pending, I believed that I had fulfilled my earlier plan to see the process through. It had been a grueling three years and a couple of months. While not happy with the assessment recommending joint-custody as opposed to me having sole custody of the children, I entered the process in good faith. I had committed the outcome to the Lord. Now the results were in and it was time to begin again. Judy seemed to be established with her live-in boyfriend. I was available for the kids for each and every access occasion on the schedule or any extra time offered by Judy.

After establishing in part of a new home of some faithful friends, it was time to find a new church. I was looking for a denomination that accepted the reality of my circumstances and truly believed in the grace of God and his forgiving power. I began to visit a number of the churches in the area.

I finally found a church that I could call home. The combination of pastor and his wife, the philosophy of ministry and the congregation made a good fit. The pastor's wife made a special effort to network newcomers into the congregation.

During my first few months there, a few friends from different contexts of my life started doing some "networking" for me in the dating game. It was strange to be doing this again. As I said to my professor, Stuart and his wife Beth, I was trying to think of something I had not done in fifteen years besides a first date with someone. All I could think of was high-jumping! With the encouragement of friends, I started dating again.

Each of those experiences were fun. The women were interesting and nice. But being older than when I last dated in college days, it is quite different. Of course society is different too.

One of the ingredients I considered was the other person's acceptance of the fact that I had a divorce and children as part of my reality. Recognizing the challenges of the custody process, I made an early decision that I would not date someone who was divorced with children. Trying to match two custody schedules would be impossible. Never married, divorced or widowed could all work.

Early in the new frontier, the pastor and his wife hosted an evening at their home for the single-agains of the church. It was an informal gathering to get acquainted. For me it was a Wow!

That was the evening I met Emma. She had been at this church for a couple of years and had left temporarily just as I had arrived. She was ready to move into a relationship after four years since her separation. Unlike myself, she did not have many happy times in her first marriage. She told the pastor that she was leaving the church for a few months to visit other churches to see what single-again programs and people were around. After three months, she had decided to return to her home church convinced that she had checked out the alternatives. She would return to the church knowing that she had tried.

It was on that Sunday that she received a call from her brother on his cell-phone. His wife had been approached by the pastor's wife to tell Emma about the evening. I was visiting my home town and parents with the children. Though it was a stretch to be back in time, I too felt that I needed to be there.

Very quickly we both connected while in the group context. I learned that she was a teacher and that she loved kids. Divorce was not an issue for her - wholeness as a person was. That was my view too. Her Christian commitment was strong and growing. Some dates and some long talks drew us closer together until we both felt that this was a relationship to take to the altar.

In the darkest times it was too much to imagine. Me finding a loving, intelligent and beautiful wife who would accept me and the children as we are? Wow!

Great Beginnings

I was very concerned that the children not have to deal with a parade of possibilities of relationships. We were still a family and so any new person in my life would be a new person in their lives too. I wanted to be very serious about someone before I added the stress of a significant other on my side of their world. They already were living with a bad experience on the other side.

After Emma and I were serious, we talked about the relationship with the children. I had given her lots of information about Ted and Michelle so that she could feel a bit like she knew them. We talked about parenting ideas and the needs of the children.

For the kids, I eased them into the idea that I was dating again. I left it vague beyond that unless they asked. Then as Emma and I were more serious, I talked about finding someone that I really liked. In the process, I described her and told them why I liked her. One thing that I stressed very strongly and clearly was my commitment to them. No matter what happened, I would always love them. No new person would take their place. Daddy would still be the same loving Dad.

I wanted to be sensitive to the stress that such a change could make for them. There would be natural fears as well about how this person would change their life. We spent a great deal of time talking to make sure they were comfortable.

Then came the first moment of truth. After the church service, I would introduce Ted and Michelle to Emma.

I wondered - would this be a disaster or a great beginning?

Both children showed their typical first 30 second shyness. But it was clear that they initially approved and that Emma enjoyed the meeting too.

She invited us to come later in the afternoon to her place and stay for dinner. Both Ted and Michelle liked the idea.

We spent the afternoon in the park and meeting her cats. Both children warmed up quickly and comfortably with her. It was fun too to see Emma's efforts to make those early connections with the children.

Dinner was some spaghetti (no sauce just lots of parmesan cheese for Ted). I watched a glow on Emma's face as she saw the four of us around her kitchen table. She had longed for this house to have a husband and children and voila! It looked much more likely that day.

After dinner, we watched Mary Poppins on a video together. Then it was a strangely difficult good-bye. It was like each of us thought this should just continue. A great time was had by all of us.

The ride home that night, during breakfast in the morning and on the trip to school, the children were enthusiastic. Emma this... Emma that... Emma, Emma, Emma! In their own way both children were selling. I felt like I was watching a combination of “The Courtship of Eddies Father” and “Sleepless in Seattle”. But we definitely had a strong green light from Ted and Michelle.

In talking to Emma, she too was pleased with our time and the beginning connections that we formed.

As I returned home alone that night after the children were back with Judy, I lay on my bed with a new hope and a grateful heart. Still lots of problems but some good things were also happening. Maybe I would get past this dark time after all. It was a great beginning and I wanted more.

Am I OK?

As a child and particularly a teen we all struggle with the question, “Am I OK?”. The answer (heard over many years) will either give us a yes or no life message. Children who are loved and affirmed grow up with a secure and positive attitude toward their world and new experience.

The work of psychologist Eric Ericson describes the social development of people in his work “The Eight Stages of Man”. For the children of divorce, it is even more crucial that they be able to answer “Yes!” to the basic question of life.

One of my concerns for Ted and Michelle has always been that they grow up with a healthy self-image. When the separation happened, this became an even greater challenge. Children of divorce tend to suffer more difficulties in adjusting to new experiences and feeling secure as people. This makes sense as you realize that the primary relationship in their life -Mom and Dad- has detonated. That explosion gives them a very strong message that you can not count on anyone for sure.

To counter that message, parents of children of divorce need to affirm their relationship with their children very directly and often. I do that in words and actions with Michelle and Ted. One of the most important things that I say is “I’ll always love you.” If we are talking about how they are feeling, I will also assure them of is that no matter what happens, I will always love them. That includes what might happen to them or to me. It also covers whatever they might do.

Children of divorce tend to blame themselves for the break-up of their parents or at least that they can’t get their parents back together a la “The Parent Trap” movie. The wish of children to reunite their biological parent is both normal and often lifelong. That is in spite of remarriage(s) and even affection for their new step-parents.

Why me? What did I do that was bad? These are questions that many adults struggle with when life does not go well. That is in spite of a lifetime of experience of good and bad times. Children who by age have less maturity and experience to make sense out of their life face an even tougher time understanding why bad things happen to them.

If a child concludes that their parents’ divorce is because they are at fault or that their parents don’t love them, they are vulnerable. It is easy for the child to then see new problems in their life as more of the same. A tough time at school must be because bad things always happen to them. If in their teens a romance ends it is the jinx at work again. Life experiences are filtered through this interpretation. A despair can follow where they believe that life will always not work out for them no matter what they do or where they are.

Children of divorce have a higher risk of suicide and becoming criminals. Those risks can be traced to a sense that life is not fair and that it will always be bad for them. But the consistent and expressed unconditional love of a parent can fight the virus of despair in the children. All children benefit from knowing that their parents (and others) love them unconditionally. “No matter what happens or what you might do, I’ll always love you.” is a powerful antidote to tough times. From a Christian perspective that is the basic message of the Good News as well. It takes faith to believe that message. But it is the message. Children of divorce need faith to believe the message of a parent who shares that same affirmation with them. Our consistency in showing that love is vital.

We need to speak words of love to our children. We also need to show our love as well. Hugs are important. My wife Emma likes to say, “Hugs are free.” Hugs affirm to the child or anyone else that they are accepted. You are OK.

The bottom line is that I never put Michelle or Ted down as people. I correct their behavior if needed but I do or say things that would say that they are a bad person or stupid. Positive messages -even in discipline- are powerful if we are consistent.

It is worth our extra attention to make sure that our children hear and feel that they are loved unconditionally. It was a gift that my parents and others gave to me. That is a great gift to give Ted and Michelle. May all of the children learn that that really are OK.

Making a Difference

As you look back on your life, you can probably identify some non-family members who were important to you when you were growing up. They might have been people in your church or Sunday School context, friends of your parents, neighbors, or counselors of camp.

The good news for parents of children of divorce is that there are many other people who will play an important role in your children's lives. This is an important point to remember when you feel like you can't do it all by yourself. Nobody is supposed to do it alone - not the intact two parent family and not the broken home.

When the kids were younger, they had a habit of saying the first and last names of some of my friends without a break. Their two names became a single word said without a pause. Some of these dear friends with their monosyllabic names have been faithful friends to not only me but to the children as well. The kids would value the good news of their coming visit. I was blessed with friends who had good people skills. They employed these skills in making the children feel important and valued.

Part of a child's identity comes from defining who they are in and in contrast to an ever widening world. These other friendly faces communicate that it is worth taking the steps outside home.

Many others who are not as close geographically keep in touch with the occasional note, visit and regular prayer support. Kids LOVE to get mail. It is a real plus for them to arrive and find a letter waiting on their bed.

Most people are awkward about what they should say and do with the kids. How are they feeling about their broken home? Am I intruding by being here? What can I do. These are all questions asked by the friends of the family.

As with any relationship, being there is very important. Regular contact with the children adds stability when the kids wonder if anything stays the same. Ted and Michelle like most kids enjoy people who are able to just be themselves and treat them as people too. For some of us it takes some work to return to our childhood perspective but it is a refreshing place to visit. No wonder Jesus taught that it was a childlike view of reality that could see God clearly.

For others who are in contact as pastor or Sunday School teacher, a child learns more about what a Christian is like than just factual knowledge. Caring people are God's hugs to needy kids. It is a great privilege and gift to be a channel of God's love to children. Of course no list of friends would be complete without mentioning pets. All kids enjoy having a furry, feathery, slimy or hairy creature to call their own. My kids were born into a family with a dog, Toffee. She lived to an old age but a year ago, her health was so poor and my living situation so tentative that I had to say goodbye to an old friend. After thirteen years, she was ready for and deserving of a rest.

The transition to Emma's world included two cats. One of them found its earlier dysfunction multiplying and so the tough decision was made to say goodbye to it. That left one cat. We had both wanted to add a dog to our equation again so the quest for a puppy began. The result was a cute little bundle of fur with large eyes. The only eyes that were bigger were those of the kids when they saw this puppy waiting for them in a box when they were coming home with us. The squeaking sound was not a bad wheel as we pretended but a new friend waiting to meet her kids.

With the aid of their uncle who was visiting, the children decided on "Toffee" in honor of their old friend. To that they added two middle names (one chosen by each of the kids). One of their joys in spending time together is being with their puppy. The puppy assures me that they feeling is quite mutual. (Toffee version 2.0 has not learned to use the computer yet...). Pets are great friends.

I am so thankful for the memories that these friends have made and are making in the lives of Michelle and Ted. As for all of us it may not be the "big things" that we do that will count as much as the difference we make in a young life.

Sharpened Pencils

One of the challenges for the parents of divorced children is how to nurture spiritual growth in your children. There are many aspects to a person's relationship with Christ. For children, this is especially important as so many values and life-shaping impressions are being caught during the early years. One of the ways I have used with my children is sharpened pencils.

As a divorced parent, alternate weekends are quite normal - regardless of who has custody. The difficulty then is to create a connection for your children with your church home as one aspect of their spiritual nurturing. Since they are not with you every Sunday, this makes it tougher for the children to have a sense of belonging to your church family. Like so many other areas, they have two of these. In some cases families where one parent has abandoned or never had a spiritual interest the children may have one weekend with church and one where they do not.

Most kids struggle with the routines of a Sunday morning. As they are at my church only every other weekend at most, I wondered how I could give them some significance to being together at church in addition to the worship, fellowship and learning experiences. Children need to feel that their church is a sanctuary - a safe place. Church can be safe for them spiritually and socially as well as physically.

It is such a different experience for them if they WANT to be there. They also benefit when they have some sense of ownership and participation - even at a young age. Too often, children come to see church as a place Daddy or Mommy go to that they HAVE to go to also. Years of feeling disconnected with church leads to teens who just don't go anymore and college students who abandon as irrelevant the faith of their fathers and mothers. After all it is not their own.

We were looking for ways for the children to feel some ownership of our church. Then one Sunday I noticed that the pencils in our pew were dull. A quick glance showed that other pews were without a pencil. A plan appeared.

My wife, Emma, and I spoke to the pastor's wife and then the pastor to ask if it was anyone's task to keep the pews supplied with pencils. They responded that no one really took care of it on a regular basis. I asked if our children could do it. They gave a quick and happy "Yes".

Next was my approach to the kids. I wanted to communicate that this was important as everyone in the church would be helped by our work. Of course a big attraction was using the electric pencil sharpener! There was a positive response.

Before our first Sunday, we took them out to get our equipment. In addition to a pile of pencils, a zippered case was purchased that could hold their Bibles and notebooks as well as our pencils. This seemed to make it more “official” for the children.

We sharpened the new pencils before the service and then did our rounds (including the balcony) after the service. It helped that they could see many missing and broken pencils. They saw the need. The work itself was made into fun as they worked between the pews hunting for unsharpened pencils. It is a great team activity as we all work together collecting and sharpening these pencils. After a while, people noticed these two children wandering around with a handful of pencils (thankfully without the tin cup). The comments of thanks that the children have received have reminded the kids that what they are doing counts.

Sharpening pencils is a simple task. It is not a big thing in the life of a church. But the lessons of faithfulness and helping others really do go to the heart of the Christian message. For us as a family, it provides a great connection with this church that is only in the children’s life every other weekend.

So if it is Sunday morning at the Fraser’s church, expect to find sharpened pencils in the pew.

Draw Big Circles

My grade two teacher informed my parents that they should expect me to become a doctor or an interpreter of ancient hieroglyphics. Amazed at her insight, they asked why she thought that this would be my destiny. Her answer was my horrific penmanship. Her immediate advice was - “Buy the boy a typewriter.”

One of the tasks of childhood is drawing circles. For some of us who are “fine-motor challenged” like I am - it is still an obstacle! (I always thought I should have been a poster kid for those unable to write legibly.) Being able to start at a point on the paper, continue on an adventure that looks round and end up at the beginning again was quite an accomplishment. Once you were good at it you could draw a fast circle. Then came the challenge of drawing the big circle.

In parenting, it helps to revisit your own childhood experiences. One of the things that helped me was remembering big circles.

Significant in my childhood was the big circle of our extended family. There were many visits and shared times together. Most important there was unconditional love and acceptance. With aunts and uncles (of the regular and great varieties), cousins (first, second, and removed) and especially grandparents you belonged. You were part of a circle bigger than just yourself.

Quite apart from what could be said sociologically about the benefits for a child it simply felt good. It meant something to be a part of a larger circle and to be loved. There can never be too much genuine and nurturing love for a child.

Children of divorce need these extra sources of love in a special way. These are important ingredients in establishing a clear sense of identity.

One of the key words of the human experience is “loss”. For the children of divorce those losses are very profound. There is a loss of security, a loss of trust, a loss of time, a loss of self-worth, and a loss of innocence.

But many of those losses can be minimized and put in perspective. If a child knows deep down that they are loved they will have the hope to overcome. That is essentially the message of Christianity. God loves us unconditionally. By faith our belief in that truth gives us the hope to go through life (with all of its good and bad) secure in the knowledge of God’s love. Children of divorce need to understand that they are unconditionally loved too.

For Ted and Michelle, their bigger circle of family have played a key role in their emotional and social well-being. Many in our family have helped. My parents have always nurtured a loving and close relationship with the children. Once the separation happened, they remained consistent with Michelle and Ted. This provided some continuity when there was so much change in the children's lives. The fear of the children of divorce is that nothing will remain the same for them.

My brother and his wife have maintained regular contact with the children too. During the darkest times they were there to add extra energy for the kids when we got together. They also put up with additional aggravations from Judy and for a while they played a role in making some access transitions easier. A visit with their aunt and uncle is always good news for Ted and Michelle.

A special uncle for both kids has been my youngest brother. They love his humor and enthusiasm. While further away geographically, Ted and Michelle always light up at the mention of his name or when we are together.

Since my marriage to Emma, our extended family circle has increased. Her mother is a valued and accepted grandmother to the children. Emma's brother and sister-in-law have reached out and been available to the children, welcoming them warmly to the family. Ted and Michelle have added three very special cousins to their lives as well.

So whoever might be available to you in your extended family include them if they can be a positive factor. Tell them about the important role they play for your children. Most will not realize what a difference they can make for you and your kids. Make opportunities to include them in your time with your munchkins. Practice drawing a big circle.

Chained Lifeguard

Swimming was a favorite activity when I was growing up. In addition to the local pools in town we had neighbors with a big pool. Eventually we added a pool to our second house and many hot days were enjoyed wet. Our summer cabin also was a great place to explore life underwater. Every year since I was less than a year old, we made the long trek up to the cabin. It was well worth the trip although I'm not sure that my parent's felt that way after with an hour still to go and impatient boys in the back seat. The other place to swim was at summer camp.

As for so many people, a Christian summer camp played an important role in my development as a person and a Christian. It was a place to learn about relationships, have lot of fun and to see what it would be like to live in a Christian environment for a couple of weeks. For me it was great. One of the areas of leadership that I developed as I made the transition from being a camper to a counselor was becoming a lifeguard. This meant taking courses when I was at home in the winter to qualify to be a lifeguard. Those were tough courses but the goal of working on the waterfront at camp was good motivation.

As a lifeguard, you learn that your greatest asset is anticipation. It is not just a case where you want to rescue someone after they have gone under the water. You want to spot someone in too deep or being careless before they get into trouble. The best rescues were the ones that were never needed.

But if a crisis happened, all of your being went into the rescue effort. You had to assess the situation instantly. Where were you Where were they Who else is around? What is the best way to get them out of the problem? The biggest question was how close do I get to the victim.

In the panic of a drowning, the victim is flooded with adrenaline. This gives them great power and speed. Combined with terror, it makes everyone very vulnerable. If you get too close, there will be two bodies to recover.

The principles of rescue are to never get closer than you have to since if you are grabbed by the victim, you will not likely be able to save them or yourself. Many accounts of strong swimming adults being drowned by small children who latch on in a rescue haunt the lifeguard.

But as with any emergency service person, your job is to be willing to give your life to rescue another person. As a parent, you are prepared to give your life for your child. One of the toughest parts of the custody process for me has been the feeling that I am a lifeguard watching my children drown. I see them struggle with the choices that Judy has made and continues to make. They are stuck in her world and it is not a healthy place for them to be.

Judy has proven herself willing to go to horrible lengths to cut me out of Ted and Michelle's life. Many nights have been spent pleading with our Heavenly Father to let my children go.

Given the system of courts and agencies, I have been very limited in what I can do to rescue these two innocent victims. What I can do I have done. Whether or not it is enough will only be known in eternity. But there is reason for some encouragement at this point. My prayers for them are like life-preservers tossed to their struggling forms in the distance. By God's grace they will reach out and hold on to them until I can pull them in to safety.

It is the hope of a lifeguard waiting to do the rescue.

Making Memories

Divorced parents learn very quickly how precious time is with their children. The life-changing interruption created by a separation and divorce teach you in a way second only to a death how fragile life is. The challenge and opportunity of parenting is making memories.

I like making memories with Emma, Ted and Michelle. Maybe it is just all those “Kodak moments” commercials. But I try to stand back from what we are doing and measure how we are doing at making memories.

This doesn't assume that everything we do is spectacular or unique. But can we take whatever we are doing and see a quality in the experience? Am I just present as just some shadow or am I really taking it in? It is kind of like the difference when we have splashed some water on our drowsy faces. Are we alert to what is happening. Part of it too asks the question, “If this was the last time we were together did we end well?” This is not a morbid approach to life. Rather it is one that seeks to drink in all of the richness of our time together.

Sometimes, memorable experiences just happen. But there are many things that we can do to make memories. Perhaps it is the Mary Poppins' view of life that sees even the most routine jobs can have an “element of fun” if we approach it with a creative attitude. Too often we allow busy to be the same as important. My appreciation of Ted and Michelle as people has helped me realize that I will miss many of their moments of discovery if I allow being busy to take their place. So while it has cost me a great deal of money, I am so grateful that I have been there for the kids whenever they were available to me.

Little did I know that when I was assisting in the children's school that these moments would be soon lost. Judy complained to the principal that I should only be allowed to be at the school when it was my access days. The law here says that custody and access are not related to school time - access means who takes them home that night and custody is who makes the big decisions like medical treatment. If you are at the school you can participate as any other parent can - no more and no less. Being a parent volunteer in classes where the teachers had helpers was my right as a parent. Only if I was not obeying the classroom rules etc. would my role end.

But Judy found a principal who did not like conflict. His responded to her complaint by saying that I should only come to the school when it was “my days”. The problem was that access orders do not specify that you can be at school with the children, it only describes after school and weekend schedules. That is because activity at school is provided for under the law. I had meetings and a letter from my lawyer in support of my position. This long story in a long story meant that I appealed his decision through the many levels of the board of education until I appeared before the board itself.

At that board meeting they followed the same argument I heard up the line - that the principal can decide who is in the school. While acknowledging that as true, I pointed out that his decision must be fair. If I had done something wrong then there could be no argument. The only thing I had done was have a bitter and nasty ex-wife. I asked the question about other events such as a spring concert. Would divorced parents not be able to attend that event because it was not “their access day”? The board said in response an amazing statement, “You could attend the concert because it is public event. You would be attending as a member of the public but not as the children’s parent.” Incredible.

The board then asked for assistance from the court to direct them, if I wanted to go to the expense and time to sue. By the time it would be resolved, the children would no longer be at an age where the classes used help. That ended my time in the classroom.

So I am grateful for the three years I did help out. I made memories with the kids as the parent who was there for them. I learned again that you can’t count on “what is” to stay the same. I value our times together and enjoy making memories with Emma, Ted and Michelle. It’s a fun way to look at the chores and opportunities of life.

Ripples On The Lake

Ted and I are sitting by the lake this evening. We look out at the colorful sunset with its beautiful hues of red and blue. He and Michelle have always loved sunsets. The surface of the lake is still and glassy on this quiet summer evening. Ted tosses out another stone. Plop! We watch the ripples circle out from the splash on their journey to each shore of the lake.

It is hard to believe that he is twenty-five already. My aches tell me that my age of fifty-two is quite believable though. Where have the years gone? Another ker-plunk. Michelle and Ted have come to this place and played on this beach since they were born. For fifty-two years I have too.

Sitting beside this man - bone of my bone and all that - I was amazed by the passage of time. Here was the little guy I watched being delivered - all grown up.

“Dad, what was it like when I was younger - you know - when you and my mother separated? What did you feel like?”

“In some ways I can hardly remember those times. It was so long ago. But in other ways it seems like just yesterday

“When you were first born, I enjoyed holding you and playing with you every day. If I was working late, I would sometimes wake you up just to spend some time together.”

“All of those expectations for my life with you both changed when your mother left. What did not change was my love for you and Michelle. After trying to reconcile with your mother, I turned my priority to you both.”

“If it had just been a case where your mother did not want to be married anymore but was the same person, the custody process would have been much easier. It would still have been painful for me to lose my marriage - that was not my wish or my choice. But in your mother’s case, she changed. No one who knew her before believed that she was the same person. At the beginning I hoped that whatever had snapped in her would snap back. But that would not happen. What was clear to me was that she would not be able to give you the kind of healthy and nurturing environment that you both needed as children.”

“That fact made me commit to doing all I could within the process to gain custody and to spend as much time as I was allowed with you both. It was commitment that changed my life. But I have no regrets.”

“Since you were both in pre-school, I decided that whatever access time was available, I would take you. On the days that I had you, I did not work. I never had a baby-sitter for you. While it would have been easier emotionally for me just to go along with the decisions your mother wanted to impose, I believed that I was accountable to the God to whom you and Michelle were dedicated and to you both to do all I could do. I knew that I could not control the outcome but I was committed to making the best choices I could make. Most important to me was that I wanted you and Michelle to know that I always loved you unconditionally. That much I could give you and I did.”

“From there, it was just a matter of trying to be a great parent. That would have been true whether or not your mother had stayed. It just made it much tougher because of all the extra problems of parenting from such different value systems.”

“It certainly made a big difference when I met your Mom, Emma. You both really bonded with her quickly and she stood firm throughout the tough times and loved you with all the love a mother could. I am so glad for all of us that she came into our lives.”

“I would not have chosen what I have watched you go through, Ted. I sure did not expect or want it to happen to me. But it is kind of like us throwing a rock into this lake. Suddenly there is a splash and there are ripples that go out in all directions. Lots of people are touched by our choices. That’s why we try to make good ones. But sometimes it is the choices of another person that change our lives. But remember Ted, God is there with us through the stillness and through the waves. He was there for me.”

We looked at the ripples together from the next splash.

Motion Sickness

I suffer from motion sickness. It is not when I am in a plane, a car or a boat. My motion sickness happens when I am in court.

Prior to my separation, I had no dealings with the courts except as a character witness on a couple of occasions. I now feel like I am a fixture in the courtroom. There have been so many custody court appearances that I have been before most of the judges in our area at one time or another. Part of the court process is filing court papers which include motions. Motions ask for something to happen.

An early lesson in the custody process is that not much happens. What does happen usually does not happen quickly. What does happen quickly is usually to the benefit of others

One of the pearls of wisdom from my second lawyer was, “You are your own best advocate.” The basic idea is that no one knows your case better than you do. He went on to point out, “Your lawyers are here to assist you but you must take responsibility for your case.” That is an important principle to remember. No matter whether you are dealing with court, lawyers, or agencies you can never hand over the ultimate responsibility for your battle. You must continue to be the commander-in-chief.

Hopefully, you have the benefit of an excellent lawyer and competent agencies to advise you well. But following their advice is not the same as handing over the choices to them as though you are a spectator. “Parent” is still the primary relationship for the benefit of your kids. By all means seek advice and use the experience and skills of your lawyer and others. The other old saying- “Anyone who represents himself has a fool for a client.”- is true.

One of the sad lessons of dealing with the court system is that it is basically a game. That may sound cynical to those of us who believe that government was placed here by God and that it ultimately serves His sovereign will.

But while there may be justice in a future life, there are many references in the Bible that point out that we live in an unjust age. David wrote with great passion and pain about how evildoers seemed to be prospering while those who tried to do good had trouble.

Knowing that the custody process is a game is a helpful perspective. There are rules in how things are done in a custody proceeding. If you play the game by the rules you will be further ahead in the long run. That does not mean that you won’t be fouled without a flag being thrown. Many dirty tricks exist to gain an unfair advantage in the process.

Overburdened court systems face so many dreadful cases that they tend to ignore many of the actions that deserve a penalty call. This may not be encouraging but it is true. So don't be surprised when you get an elbow, a face-mask or worse.

Retaliation is a temptation but our basic test always must be, "What is best for the children?". I know that Judy will have much to explain for some of her dirty tricks. But whether she is ever asked to explain in this life is a big "if". What is an advantage in the custody process is knowing that you have done your best for the children. Besides, you learn in team sports that a referee may miss the first penalty but they always seem to catch retaliation. Getting even is getting less. Playing the game with integrity is getting ahead. Why settle for getting even?

A good attorney will act to help you understand the game and how best to help your Ted and Michelle. If your motivation is truly the best interests of the children then making good choices in the court process is vital.

Most of the courts are backed up severely. Too often, judges rule on the basis of tradition and the path of least resistance. That is part of their method of coping with difficult issues in an overworked system.

The hope of the parent locked into a custody battle is the long term. The long term is not this week or this year. It is not even when your custody agreement is signed or a trial is concluded. The hope must be focused on your relationship with your adult children thirty years from now.

Having the long view will help you as you sit in a crowded courtroom awaiting your turn to be heard. It will help when you suffer setbacks and injustice from a very troubled court system. As for the motion sickness, perhaps the courts should have airline "honk-bags" available to all who attend.

Superglue Relationships

One of the great inventions of our age is superglue. For those of you who have used it, you know how amazing it is. Instantly there is a bond between two surfaces that make it easier to break the item than separate where the glue is.

For a parent, a hope of old age is to have a mature and loving relationship with their adult children. No longer would we be just a parent but also a friend. There are times when you look into the eyes of your newborn child that you wonder if they will ever grow up. They look so small and helpless. It takes a leap of imagination to realize that someday they will be adults. But by the grace of God that will happen.

An extra concern for the parent of children of divorce is how a broken home will change their relationship with their children. Will the children trust me? In cases where the ex-spouse cuts down the other parent, it is normal to worry what the children will believe about the criticized parent. Will they believe that I love them? Will they think I am a bad person because of what Judy says or does? How can I have a superglue relationship with Ted and Michelle that can't be separated by time or Judy?

Like most parents, I take seriously my role as a parent. It is both a joy and a responsibility. Beginning with the first moments with a new wriggling life in the delivery room, you realize how inadequate you are to be a parent. Here is this human baby dependent on you for its life.

As helpless as you may feel in the earliest stages, you learn as the children grow that their lives involve so much beyond their physical needs. With developing personalities, you begin to understand afresh how complex the emotional, intellectual, social and spiritual needs of a human being are.

For the Christian, a source of comfort comes from knowing that we have a heavenly "Parent" who loves and cares for us. (One can only imagine how we would feel parenting ourselves!) So as I struggle to parent Ted and Michelle well, I take comfort from knowing that God has promised to care for these children as well as care for me.

The best model for me as a parent comes from God's example of care for those in his care. His unconditional love was extended to us even when we were his enemies. He faithfully accepts us in spite of our failures. Our growth and development as whole persons is a major part of the message of Christianity. Primary on God's agenda is relationship. Regardless of our age, wealth, sex, race or social standing the same relationship with God is available.

That is an encouragement to me as I look at my kids. I realize that in spite of whatever other “things” I may be able to give my children, the best I can give them is an unconditional relationship with me. That especially includes my time.

For divorced parents, your time is often limited by court orders and access schedules. Too often you would but can't be with the children you love. That means that when we are together it is prime time. Prime time does not mean all entertainment. You don't have to be a three ring circus parent. You also do not have to be a perfect parent. It is guaranteed that you will make mistakes - that is part of the joy of being human. But if your heart is right, you can make a difference in young lives.

I have had the sad experience where Judy has tried to destroy my relationship with Ted and Michelle. It has been a terrible source of pain and heartache. There were moments when I despaired that she would succeed in isolating them from me. But in spite of her best efforts, Judy has not severed my relationship with Ted and Michelle. By God's grace, my relationship with them is based on an unconditional love that has not changed. The children both know what our relationship has been, is and always will be. Sadly they have learned what kind of mother Judy is as they have been victimized by her treachery.

Emma and I enjoy a superglue relationship with Ted and Michelle based on our love of Christ and each other. Though the trials and tests come, we anticipate our old age (yet far off!) in a relationship of mutual respect and love with our children. That's the superglue I have used with Michelle and Ted from their birth and it is the same formula that Emma has used too. Thanks be to God for his superglue love!

Somewhere Out There

In the children's video collection is the movie, "An American Tale". It is a very touching story of a little mouse named Fievel who is alone. From that movie comes to song, "Somewhere Out There". The song is the cry of hope and longing for someone who is separated from those he loves. Some of the key lines are that "Someone is thinking of me and loving me night... Someone's saying a prayer that we'll find one another... Then we'll be together..." which helps Fievel keep going.

The most important message that we can communicate to the children of divorce is that we are that we are loving them and praying for them tonight no matter how far apart we are. It is a love that reaches across miles and through walls created by a vindictive ex-spouse. The hope of the parent of children of divorce is the same hope for the child. We will be reunited and together someday without the barriers of the custody process.

One of the greatest gifts to me was a conversation with my doctor early in my separation. He shared with me that ten years earlier he had gone through very similar experiences when his wife left. He too went through the custody process with all of its unfairness. The mother of his children was not the wife he had known and loved. He described vividly how he had driven back home in tears for his forty minute drive after an access visit was over. He watched his children cope with a variety of unhealthy and unstable relationships in his ex-wife's life.

His good news and the hope he lent me was that ten years later, he and his children enjoyed an excellent relationship. They were now teens and his relationship with them had survived and flourished in spite of all their turmoil and his pain.

His advice was to keep the long view and to be a consistent point of reference for them. That way, no matter what happened in their life they would KNOW that you loved them and that you would always be there for them. "You provide their stability even when they are not with you."

Those words from that doctor almost five years ago have been the most helpful for me. What also gave me hope was my knowledge of him as a person. Here he was, someone who was making a difference for others and obviously a caring individual who was effective. This gave me some hope in that early crisis that maybe I too could emerge from the darkness with myself and my kids intact.

The day after Emma was introduced to the children, Judy illegally interrupted my access to the children. Her lies and willingness to use the children against their best interests have shocked even the most cynical observers in our case. For over a year, we have not had the normal access schedule operating as we are in system that does not hold mothers accountable as it should any parent who attempts to undermine a parent. In her cruelty, Judy kept Michelle from attending the marriage of Emma and me. For the rest of our lives, there will be a person missing in our pictures of that day.

Sadly for all of us, Judy has proven to me that she is an unfit mother. The custody agreement will be replaced next year by the results of a custody trial. I have no illusion that the end result will surely be my being the sole custodial parent. But as a matter of conscience, I must take this to its conclusion for the sake of the children. Knowing what I know, I would be a negligent father and untrue to my promise to raise these two children in Christian nurture if I did not proceed.

Judy did her best to sever my relationship with the children. For a while, I feared it might come to pass. But when I and the children were reunited, I found the bonds forged in the dark times of the separation and divorce could not be broken by Judy's evil choices.

I am thankful for Emma's steadfast commitment to me and these children throughout these tough times. It has strengthened our relationship and created a maternal bond with these kids who need a real mother. Many others of my family and friends have been faithful in their prayers and participation with the children.

The good news is that having gone through much more than I could ever have imagined, God has faithfully protected my relationship with Ted and Michelle. I'm keeping the long view as I face short term pain. Let me encourage you to persevere because your children need you too. Use the many resources that God has given you in your life. As the Bible says, the greatest of these is LOVE. Love your kids. That consistent, unconditional love can bind their many wounds as children of divorce. You can do it. By God's grace you will!

My kids know that Somewhere Out There is a Dad who loves them, prays for them and will find them no matter what. I love you, Ted and Michelle.

Epilogue

Thanks for finishing this book. The good news is that as low as I've gone it is not where I am at now. The children and I have survived with our relationship intact in spite of tremendous pressure applied by my ex-wife.

I wish that the children would not have had this experience. It was not their choice. But God's grace is especially potent in the lives of children. This summer both children made decisions to follow Jesus. These first choices begin their spiritual pilgrimage. Much awaits them in the future. I will continue to nurture this faith. There were many days over the five years where I wondered if they would not totally reject God given all the pain they have gone through. So to see these beginnings is a great source of joy and hope.

I love being a dad. It is the greatest. Now with the benefit of my marriage to Emma life is better for all of us. But during the toughest times with both children as pre-schoolers, I made a home for my children. In spite of my own pain in the earliest months of the separation, I never missed time with my children. I never used a baby-sitter. Our time was prime time. As tough as it was we made it together.

This book does deal with more of the tough stuff. Part of the reason is that this tends to be what no one will write or talk about. So it has not been ten years of only negatives. Now there are many more positives.

Since this book was originally completed in 1994, we now have two more children in our family and Ted is now living with us full time and visiting his mother every other weekend for an overnight. It may be that Michelle will choose to move here when she turns 12 as well. The older children have a great relationship with the younger ones. There are many dynamics to the new *blended* family - but that is another book.

The bottom line is that by God's grace I have stayed the course and the rewards through it all is a solid relationship with all my children. Emma's role in keeping me going and making our family bond so seamless has been a major key.

For parents of children of divorce, I would encourage you to keep going for your children. As tough as it is to go on it is the best choice for the children and for you.

Your love for your children will be written on their lives. Give that love time to do its work as the children grow up.

May God minister to you as you parent your children.

RESOURCE QUESTIONS

Life Echoes

- 1. What do you think of the author's imagery of the paintings?**
- 2. How do you feel when your children are gone?**
- 3. What reminds you that they are not there but were recently?**
- 4. If you could paint a new life picture, what would it look like?**
- 5. What is your custody status right now?**

The Looking Glass

- 1. In what ways was your separation sudden or expected?**
- 2. How is your post-separation life the same?**
- 3. How is it different?**
- 4. What have been some strange experiences in this weird new world for you?**
- 5. Do you feel like it is all just a bad dream? What would you like to wake up to in a new world?**

Pilot to Copilot

- 1. The image of copiloting together is powerful. In what ways did you copilot with your Ex when you were married?**
- 2. In what ways can you coparent successfully now?**
- 3. What are the most difficult parts of coparenting for you?**
- 4. Why is it more difficult to coparent now?**
- 5. To what extent are your children experiencing two different value systems between your two homes?**

Kidding Around

- 1. What gives the author a sense of peace?**
- 2. How do you feel when your children visit your Ex?**
- 3. How did your attitude toward reconciliation affect the outcome of you custody process?**
- 4. Do you agree with the author's view that the militant and uncooperative are rewarded? Why?**
- 5. How do the biblical examples help you think about your children and their needs?**

Graduating to Grade One

- 1. Where have you had extra contact with your children?**
- 2. How have the schools treated you as a single again or blended family parent?**
- 3. What can you do with your children's teachers to focus on the children's needs?**
- 4. How are your children when you are in a group setting with other children?**
- 5. What do you think your children would wish if they could put it into words?**

A View From The Basket

- 1. What bothers you most as you watch your children grow up?**
- 2. How are your emotions different when the children are not with you?**
- 3. How is you Ex different than when you were together?**
- 4. How do you feel when you talk together about the children?**
- 5. What do you think God feels toward you right now?**

When Your Dog Smiles...

- 1. What role does a pet have in your life right now?**
- 2. Why is humor important in tough times?**
- 3. When could your "ideal family picture" been taken?**
- 4. What would your "ideal family picture" look like now?**
- 5. What important ingredients of your old life are still with you now?**

Who's Got The Problem?

- 1. What are tough times of the year for you?**
- 2. Are there any school event that have been difficult? How?**
- 3. How do your children react to being present with both parents who are not together?**
- 4. If there is a new significant other with your Ex, what is your relationship like?**
- 5. What is your prayer for the children?**

Joy In The Strangest Places

- 1. How does the kitchen feel to you?**
- 2. In what ways do you feel drained when with the children?**
- 3. What is your favorite meal to prepare for the children?**
- 4. At what level do the children participate with you in activities like cooking?**
- 5. Why is it important for children to be involved in cooking and chores?**

Once Upon A Time...

- 1 Have you used your own made up bedtime stories with the children?**
- 2. What is valuable about bedtime?**
- 3. What do you learn about your children during your bedtime routines?**
- 4. In what ways are the children creative in their participation?**
- 5. What kind of prayer times do you have with the children? Why is that important?**

Maraversaries

- 1. How candid are you with God in prayer about your children?**
- 2. What is the most frustrating part of your children's situation right now?**
- 3. What anniversaries are tough for you?**
- 4. How is your optimism level at this point?**
- 5. What would a miracle of God look like for your family?**

Resetting Your Clock

- 1. What are the toughest days in your week?**
- 2. When do you feel frustrated as a parent?**
- 3. What were your routines with the children before the separation?**
- 4. How do you cope with the missing days?**
- 5. What have you done to keep your connection?**

Tic-Tac-Toe

- 1. How have you been playing Tic-Tac-Toe with you ex?**
- 2. What are some of the communication problems you face with your ex?**
- 3. How has your ex responded to your initiatives to talk about the kids?**
- 4. Do you feel that your ex understands what you are trying to do?**
- 5. What role does trust play in communication?**

Toffee Speaks

- 1. Write about your pet if you have one.**
- 2. What would a neutral party like a Toffee have observed about your marriage?**
- 3. What do you miss about your married life?**
- 4. What do you think your children will remember?**
- 5. What would you like them to remember?**

How Do You Spell Relief?

- 1. When have you felt overwhelmed?**
- 2. How has the custody process affected you financially?**
- 3. What have been the toughest losses for you?**
- 4. What affect on your reputation has the divorce and custody battle had?**
- 5. Do you feel free to talk openly to God about how your feeling? Why?**

Munchkin Magic

- 1. How do you remember your childhood years?**
- 2. What are some fun memories with the children?**
- 3. Why are the simple activities often the best?**
- 4. Where did you find a safe place to be with the children?**
- 5. What that your children have done gives you a sense of wonder?**

System Crash

- 1. How has your experience with the courts been?**
- 2. What has been positive?**
- 3. What do you wish was changed?**
- 4. When did you secure a lawyer?**
- 5. Have you taken ownership of your case? Why is this important?**

Chickens, Eggs, and Roosters

- 1. What has your experience been with how Fathers are viewed as parents?**
- 2. Why is it important for children to have a male influence as well as a female one?**
- 3. If you have seen Mrs. Doubtfire, what was your reaction?**
- 4. Why is there a bias in the court systems against fathers?**
- 5. Of the fathers of divorce you know, what is their attitude toward their children?**

Of Giants and Other Parents

- 1. What are your memories of fairy tales and stories when you were growing up?**
- 2. What are the fears of children of divorce?**
- 3. Where is a safe place for your children?**
- 4. What can you do to give your children a sense of belonging?**
- 5. What can you do to protect your children from the unfriendly influences outside?**

Terrorist Ex

- 1. Have you felt that your Ex was trying to undermine your relationship with the children?**
- 2. What can be done to minimize the damage to the children?**
- 3. Why do some parents use their children in a custody battle?**
- 4. What has your experience been with demanding people**
- 5. What are your boundaries to protect yourself and the children?**

Cotton Candy

- 1. What kinds of activities for fun do you and the children do?**
- 2. How are you coping with the need to have fun?**
- 3. What are some routine chores that you have made fun?**
- 4. Any favorite jokes?**
- 5. How do you balance everyday activities with fun ones?**

Significant Preparation

- 1. How close are you to dating again?**
- 2. What are some areas that you need to prepare?**
- 3. How will you know when you are ready?**
- 4. What impact is your dating life (or lack of it) having on your children?**
- 5. Have you had any reactions from your children to you dating? What?**

The Dull Ache

- 1. How does the term the dull ache fit with your experience?**
- 2. When do you feel your ache less?**
- 3. When do you feel it more?**
- 4. How are others doing at trying to share your burden?**
- 5. How are you doing at letting others help you?**

WOW!

- 1. If you have reached the point of being ready, have you met someone special yet? (If not, what would you like in a new relationship?)**
- 2. What do children need in a new relationship?**
- 3. What have been (or might be) your children's reaction to a new relationship?**
- 4. Who is (could be) networking for you?**
- 5. What can you do to prepare the children for your future?**

Great Beginnings

- 1. What preparation does the other person need before they meet your children?**
- 2. What would be normal reactions for children to a new person?**
- 3. Why might different children react differently to the same new person?**
- 4. What reassurance do your children need?**
- 5. What can make an introduction a great beginning?**

Am I OK?

- 1. Why is the question, "Am I OK?" so basic to our self-worth?**
- 2. Why might children of divorce struggle more with that question?**
- 3. As Christians, what is the basis of a positive self-image?**
- 4. How often do the children need reassurance that they are OK?**
- 5. Why is unconditional love especially important to children of divorce?**

Making A Difference

- 1. Who are significant non-family members in your growing up experience?**
- 2. Who play that role for your kids?**
- 3. Why are these people important in your parenting?**
- 4. Who else could play a role in your children's life?**
- 5. Who needs to hear from you that they play an important role in your children's lives?**

Sharpened Pencils

- 1. What is your church life like?**
- 2. How do your children feel about God right now?**
- 3. Why do children of divorce struggle with their relationship with God?**
- 4. What connection do your children feel with your church?**
- 5. How can you build a stronger relationship between your children and your church family?**

Draw Big Circles

- 1. Who is in the big circle of your family?**
- 2. Identify the different roles each play?**
- 3. Who could have a greater role?**
- 4. What do your family understand the children's needs to be?**
- 5. How can you update them on what is really happening with the children and you?**

Chained Lifeguard

- 1. What in your growing up played the kind of role camp played for the author?**
- 2. In what ways does the role of lifeguard make sense to you as a parent?**
- 3. Have you felt like your children are "drowning"? Explain.**
- 4. With what are your children struggling?**
- 5. How can you pray for your children?**

Making Memories

- 1. What are some of your Kodak moments with your children?**
- 2. How can you improve the quality of the times you are together with the kids?**
- 3. What are some of your routines that could have an element of fun added to them?**
- 4. How do you cope with the feeling that your time is fleeting?**
- 5. How much of life is attitude?**

Ripples on the Lake

- 1. Have you ever imagined what your children will be like as adults?**
- 2. What will be the tough questions for you to answer?**
- 3. In what ways are you looking forward to their adulthood?**
- 4. How confident do you feel about the future?**
- 5. What will your answer to the big question "Why?" be?**

Motion Sickness

- 1. What have your experiences with the courts been like?**
- 2. What contacts have you had with other agencies. How did they do?**
- 3. What has been the most positive experience in the system?**
- 4. What has been the worst?**
- 5. What should be changed about the custody system?**

Superglue Relationships

- 1. How strong is the bond between you and the children right now?**
- 2. In what ways has your ex tried to undermine your relationship?**
- 3. What is your relationship with your heavenly "Parent" like right now?**
- 4. Do you feel pressure to be a perfect parent? Why?**
- 5. What can you do to make a superglue relationship with the children?**

Somewhere Out There

- 1. What was your reaction to the American Tale if you saw it?**
- 2. Why is prayer both a source of comfort and hope?**
- 3. Who has helped you cope with the pain of dealing with your hurting children?**
- 4. How do communicate unconditional love for the children?**
- 5. What do you think about Terry's pilgrimage?**

FOR THE PASTOR

In ministry today, there are many demands on the time and energy of the pastor. Many of these urgencies are necessary and some are even worthy. (Some just cannot be avoided!) As one who has gone through the single parent experience, allow me to be an advocate and an enthusiast for the difference the pastor can make in the life of a single parent family. I greatly benefited from the efforts of the pastors in my life who were channels of God's grace to me and my children during the darkest times and during my recovery.

Ministering to those who have been through the experience of separation or divorce is a very unique in challenging area for pastors and those who serve in the local church context. As is true in the separation or divorce legal proceedings, when there are children involved then the issues and pain are very complex. The process of healing and the many questions relating to the separation and divorce are complicated by the need to also consider the ongoing pain of the children.

In the separation and divorce without children, it is quite possible for the former couple to have very little contact in the future. However when there are children involved, the contacts will continue at some level throughout life. If the children are young, then these contacts are more intense as there are common parenting issues. Even in cases where one parent has full custody and the other parent has little or no access to the children, the issues of parenting still remain for both parents. The custodial parent may feel that they have all the responsibility while the non custodial parent may feel helpless. Always in the back of the mind of both parents is the ongoing question (admitted or not) of how the other parent would raise the children.

It is helpful for pastors to understand that in addition to grieving the loss of the marriage (or in some cases celebrating the end of the marriage) the parent also must deal with a variety of special issues relating to their children. This can have the effect of postponing some of the important work that grief must due in the recovery process. In some cases, concentrating on the children is a way of avoiding the very real pain of the separation and divorce. In other cases, the individuals are so overwhelmed by their own pain and difficulties that they ignore the needs of the children. This too is an unhealthy balance.

As you draw alongside, the pastor can assist by encouraging the individuals to deal with both the current needs of the children as well as the important process of grieving the loss of the marriage. The temptation for many individuals is to abandon the children (physically or emotionally) since the contact with the children usually involves some level of contact with the ex-spouse. Long term, each parent needs to be able to look back on their time with the children with integrity. Either extreme of becoming the perfect parent who controls everything and has no life beyond the children or being in the absent parent who has little or no contact with the children will bring disaster.

Most denominations have as part of their tradition either a christening service or a dedication service for infants of the church. On those occasions there is often an expression by the church to care for the family and to assist them in the spiritual nurture of the child. At no time is the extra care of the church needed more than during a separation or divorce. This is an opportunity for the church family to gather around the parent and especially the children. During this time, the children need additional reassurance of their significance and relationships. Typically, the single-parent no longer has the same level of emotional or financial resources to give to the child. While some may assume that the child moves between two households and therefore is always under care, these two homes are less than the sum of their parts in the lives of these children. Neither parent is able to provide the same level of stability and nurture that the intact family can provide.

It is helpful for the larger church family to be educated and informed about the needs of those going through a separation and divorce. For the sake of the children of divorce, we need to help our church family understand what they can do to make the single parent and the children feel included and wanted. Social expressions such as having the damaged family over for dinner or an evening can make a huge difference in the self-esteem of the children and the single-parent. So much of church life assumes a nuclear, traditional family. Sadly, many people find themselves as a single parent trying to fit in.

If we as churches are unable to minister to and integrate the single parent families then a huge percentage of the population will become casualties of this war and will be people who will seek refuge outside of the church. Given the teachings of Scripture and the tradition of the church as a place of healing and restoration, it is a tragedy that a large percentage of today's generation are lost to church for the want of small social contacts.

As with so much in ministry, the tone and modeling set by the pastor will inform the people how to treat single parents and their children.

May God give you the grace and insight needed to rescue the souls cut adrift when a marriage ends. Any effort that you are able to make or coordinate may be the only "Voice of God" that these parents in pain might hear during their *Dark Night Of The Soul*. Your efforts might be quickly accepted, or viewed with suspicion or rebuffed by the single parent in pain. Over the long term, your efforts *will be remembered*. You could be part of the new morning in the life of this family.

FOR THE SMALL GROUP LEADER

In the small group setting, ministering to those who are single parents is like working with a bottle of oil and vinegar dressing. These individuals are so shaken up by the separation and divorce experiences that it is difficult for them to distinguish between issues of their children (oil) and issues as an ex-spouse (vinegar). It takes both time and a pause in the agitation of custody issues for these two dimensions in the life of the single-parent to become clear.

Part of the value of a small group is to allow people to concentrate their mind and emotions on some particular issues. This along with the opportunity to express feelings and receive support as a person are very essential in the recovery process and ongoing health of the person.

One of the key roles of the small group leader is to help individuals to distinguish between issues that really revolve the around the anger toward the ex-spouse and those issues which relate to the children. In the blur created by the strong emotions of the separation or divorce it is difficult for individuals to see clearly what is going on. It is also quite natural for someone who has been betrayed at some level by their ex-spouse to not trust any parenting decisions being made by the other person.

If a custody battle has ensued (no pun intended) then whenever communication might have been present before is likely not present now. This also feeds the distrust. It is also typical that changes in personality occur immediately after separation. As these changes are observed or imagined, the other parent will have concerns about the parenting strategies and decisions made by the other parent.

Perhaps the most helpful strategy for the small group leader is to remind each member of the group that they must concentrate their efforts. The quest is becoming the best person they can be, the best parent they can be and to always make decisions in the best long-term interest of their children. Sometimes this involves stepping back from the emotion and anger of the moment and make choices that will look good 20 years from now. I do not suggest a using a small group of for single parents as the forum to address individual issues of separation and divorce. That can be more effectively done in a small group with that has its purpose. Individual issues in the small group on parenting as single parents need to be acknowledged and then set aside as something to be handled in a different small group or in a counseling context.

Small groups for single parents aren't very important tool and resource that benefits not only the individual but also the children. I would encourage you to continue this sometimes difficult but very necessary ministry. Be patient as the results of your work in the small group context may only be truly understood in the lives of these children as they grow up. You may play a critical role in this parent be able to recover and minister to their children. This could have a profound effect for generations because you cared. God bless you in your important ministry of love.

Ministry Seminars for churches, retreats and groups available.

We welcome your comments on both the book and the manual. Feedback to Terry Fraser is welcome through McK.

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