



IN IT FOR THE LONG HAUL

By Marilyn Sharpe

A cherished friend, amazing mother of two young children, sent me a frustrated email. "I was mortified tonight that my children didn't get their awards at soccer, because they were unkind to one another during practice. I was so grateful to the coach for calling them on it, but embarrassed, that they behaved so badly toward each other. I really don't think I'm cut out for this whole mothering thing...I don't feel like I'm getting my messages across. Ugh!"

I replied, "You described one of those parenting situations in which all of us wish the earth would open and swallow us. No one better models grace-filled, generous, inclusive, or kind ways of treating all God's children. I know it is no consolation right now, but it will pay huge dividends. Your children WILL treat one another with great kindness, be incredibly close friends, and go out into the world, exhibiting the same qualities that you have modeled for them ... just not now!"

My three are proof positive that it does eventually work! They love and support one another in incredibly touching, caring ways. But I can share stories of mine that just weren't pretty. We all muddled through.

PS. You are so right to thank God for the gift of a coach who reinforces the same behaviors you have worked so hard to instill. Redundancy is your friend, especially from someone your children admire and from whom they want approval. I wish our larger world would give this same kind of reinforcement to our children. Imagine a world in which all adults stood at the ready to also catch our kid being their best selves ... and affirmed them for it."

It's an interesting thing about parenting - there is no graduation or retirement program, no return policy. Whether by birth, adoption, or marriage we jump in with both feet and learn to swim. Parenting really is a life sentence!

And that's the good news.

Why? Because what I see and hear and experience today, whether from my toddler or teen, is not their permanent mailing address. Parenting is a lifelong journey for parents, traveling alongside their child, grown to youth, grown to adult. Parenting has its effect over time. Any parenting resource that promises, "just do this three times, and you have change for a lifetime," never lived with my children ... or with yours, I would venture to say. No, we are never done.

Consider metaphors from nature. A flower bud emerges in its own sweet time, opening slowly to reveal what it was created to be. Force it open, and it becomes a distorted, deformed thing. A lump of coal, subjected to pressure over time, becomes a diamond. The rock walls of Temperance River, scoured continuously by churning water, become smooth, elegant, round cauldrons. Jagged rocks, pummeled by the same roiling waters, become smooth stones. We are the forces of nature in the lives of our children, creating a safe place to unfold over time and being the shaping waters, that smooth the rough surfaces.

We are in it for the long haul. Blessings on your journey.

FAMILY ACTIVITIES

1. Create a place in your home to measure your kids' growth each year - doorway, inside a door, or wall in the laundry room works well. (If you are likely to move, use paper, oilcloth, or strip of wood that you can remove and take with you.) Annually, mark their height, date it, and record skills they have mastered and experiences they've had this year.
2. Catch your kids being good and doing well. Affirm them. Remember, what gets attention, gets repeated!
3. Celebrate accomplishments! Light a candle at dinner. Have a family party.
4. When times are challenging, remember:
 - a. Separate personhood from behavior. Behavior can change; personhood can't.
 - b. Be their "rear view mirror," reminding them of times in the past that they have done well.
 - c. Be their "telescope," predicting that they will soon move through this difficult time. Forecast a wonderful future.
 - d. Be vigilant in sighting even small improvements.