



REAL FAMILY

By Marilyn Sharpe

With permission, I am sharing a letter sent to me recently by a good friend. This, I believe, reflects what it is to be a “real family.” As you begin this new year, may you see and appreciate all of the family that you have and make room for those who need you to be their family.

Dear Marilyn,

I have to share some good news in my life. I was in Chicago last weekend and closed on a condo. My son Smo and I are partners in this venture. He will live there now and I will join him in a few years when I retire.

I don't know if I told you about Smo. He is a son by Spirit, not by blood. He was found by our youth group when I was in Chicago. His father, who had physically abused him, threw him out of the house. He was living in a warehouse.

I took him in when he was 14. He completed high school and college and is now the Human Resources Director at an Embassy Suites Hotel. We have grown close over the last few years. It was not always that way. You know parenting!!! He had street sense and, to defend himself, could be very manipulative. I stuck it out through all the deceptions. That's what love does, you know.

Three years ago, he came to a surprise party my congregations had for the 30th anniversary of my ordination. Although we had only been in touch occasionally, Smo said, “It was an expense I just had to make, because he is that important to me.” Smo announced to everyone that I was his dad. (Thankfully, he explained that I was his foster dad. What trouble he could have made for this pious, single pastor!!!)

From then on, I have had an "organic" sense of connection to him. I never felt this way before. He has felt the same way. We talk on the phone, share e-mails, and are always sure to say, "I love you." A friend said, "Frank, you may not have done diapers, but you have parented."

Here is what he sent me recently.

I may not have said this enough, and you know how letting honest emotion come out gives me a stomach ache, but I have to say it. You will never really know the way that I feel about you. It is more than the title “Father” could ever describe. Unfortunately, there is no word that encompasses the things that you have done for me. It's about repairing a broken human being, healing a damaged heart. It's about letting go, laughing, loving, and, yes, even the daily spoonfuls of faith in God, that have truly made me who I am. I owe you the very person that I am because of what you have given, sacrificed, and had faith in. If "I love you" were enough, I would say it to you more often, but society has really watered down that phrase. So please know that, even in my silence, I love you more than you will ever truly know.

*It is time now to take some Maalox. I will talk to you soon.
Your son,
Smo*

I am sharing all this with you, Marilyn, because I know you collect stories; also, because I am very proud. Christ has brought us together and continues to sustain us. I feel so blessed. The faith is passing on.

Smo is now parenting a young man, shunned by his family. So I guess I am a grandfather! We are all going to get together for Thanksgiving in the new house. Included will be a retired Episcopal priest and his wife, former colleagues of mine in Chicago. They had three children, but now tragically have none. I am their adopted son; so now we have great grandparents! None are legal adoptions, but adoptions by the Spirit.

*Peace, joy, and love,
Frank*



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And then, the gift of all gifts, an email from Smo:

... Frank was very gracious about what I was like as a kid. I had been homeless for about a year before I met Frank and the youth group. I was a treacherous, deceitful, little wretch of a boy, but Frank stuck to his guns, and stuck with me at the same time. Now being a parent-by-proxy....I sooo get it....If you don't think what goes around comes around, you just haven't waited long enough.

But Michael is the pride of my life and it has been so worth it, not just for him, but for me as well. I got a chance to give back to creation, and fill a need in the world, and to feel a love born of understanding, not simply because we share DNA.

I am lucky enough to have had a chance to survive long enough to see my life change in ways I could not have imagined at 14. And now I have to get ready to cook a dinner for four generations of Family that were created in love, and designed to withstand the test of time.

Thank you, Frank and Smo, for sharing your story and your family. God's blessings to you all.

FAMILY ACTIVITIES

1. Thank God for all of the people that you call family.
2. Make a photo collage of all of those people and hang it for all to see.
3. At the dinner table, light a votive candle in honor of each one. See how it brings the light of Christ into your home.
4. Call, email, or write a note that expresses your love and appreciation of all they mean to you.
5. As a family, discuss someone who needs you to be their family right now. Invite them to a family dinner.