

CHAPTER 1

Hope and Healing

“For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.”

— Jeremiah 29:11 (NIV)

Hope. It’s a little word with lots of meaning and many different meanings at that. Hope is something everyone wants and certainly needs. Without hope there is little reason to go on, as in the saying that signals the bitter end—“when all hope is lost.” With hope and for hope people persevere and do extraordinary things, even though it may seem to some that the situation is “beyond all hope.” And when hope proves to be merely “false hope” or hope seemingly fails, it can be discouraging and at times even devastating. The question is not whether hope is important in our lives, but rather what exactly is hope and how can we find it.

Over the years we’ve heard many parents say things such as, “We were so sure God called us to adopt our son, but we don’t understand why nothing we do seems to work! He just keeps getting worse and worse. We’re at the end of our rope!” We are talking about good, faithful people who are devoted and committed and want nothing more than to be good parents and to raise healthy, happy children who love God and love others. These parents started the adoption or foster care journey confident, joyful and full of hope, but all too soon came to the point of questioning their decisions, their ability and whether they ever really heard God’s voice at all. Feeling alone, frustrated and defeated, they begin to lose hope as they struggle to survive and simply endure the challenges of each new day.

Hope for the Whole Child

In our respective roles as researcher/teacher and church ministry leaders we’ve had the privilege to walk with many families as they discovered and re-discovered the joy of parenting. Central to this is helping parents become aware of and focus on the “whole child.”

In the days of the Old Testament, devout Hebrew fathers would stand facing Jerusalem several times each day and recite the Shema: “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength” (Deuteronomy 6:5, NIV). In response to a religious expert’s question about what was the greatest commandment, Jesus replied by also quoting the Shema, and adding to it a second command—to love your neighbor as yourself (Mat-

thew 22:39).

In this way, Scripture teaches us something very important about how we have been created to relate and be related to. Jesus made it clear that we are to love God and others with our whole selves—the same way we need to be loved. Similarly, we ask parents to cultivate an awareness of the “whole being” of their child. This requires that they be mindful of their child’s “heart, mind, soul and strength” even as they learn to fully embrace their child’s past, present and future. By loving and nurturing our children in this holistic way we can give them the gift of “real hope”—an opportunity to heal and become whole—even as we teach them about and point them toward the source of everlasting hope in Jesus Christ.

Keeping a Grip on Hope

The period following the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 B.C. was a “dark” time for the Jews in Babylonian exile. It was a time of great suffering and seemingly little hope, yet in the midst of these circumstances Jeremiah wrote these words:

*I'll never forget the trouble, the utter lostness,
the taste of ashes, the poison I've swallowed.
I remember it all—oh, how well I remember—
the feeling of hitting the bottom.
But there's one other thing I remember,
and remembering, I keep a grip on hope:
God's loyal love couldn't have run out,
his merciful love couldn't have dried up.
They're created new every morning.
How great your faithfulness!
I'm sticking with God (I say it over and over).
He's all I've got left.
It's a good thing to quietly hope,
quietly hope for help from God.*

— Lamentations 3:19-24, 26 (*The Message*)

Questions to Consider and Discuss:

1. Looking at this passage of Scripture, where is the author of these words placing his hope? Does he seemingly “lose hope” at times?

2. Thinking about your adoption or foster care journey, what challenges or issues have you encountered (or do you expect to encounter) that have caused (or could cause) you to lose hope?

3. What are some things that we as parents need to “remember” (i.e., focus on and keep in mind) in order to keep our “grip on hope”?

4. What aspects of your “whole child” do you sometimes overlook or fail to embrace? How might being more holistic actually become a source of hope and healing for you and your child?

The Gardens of Life

By Cheryl Macdonald

We moved into our current home about two years ago, and as with any previously owned home there were a few not so welcome surprises. These unwelcomed surprises were easily overcome, however, by the beautiful landscaping, in particular the well-planned and maintained backyard garden, that we inherited with our new home.

Surrounding our stone pool deck is a lovely haven of green boasting an array of interesting flowers and trees. From the four varieties of roses to the multitude of crape myrtles, lilies and blooming hedges, color graces our little backyard retreat virtually year round. While maintaining our backyard garden requires some effort, we humbly admit that most of it existed long before we claimed it as “ours.”

As the seasons change we love the new surprises that seemingly bloom to greet us—lovely things we did not plant and therefore are delighted to discover. There are, however, other things in our garden we most certainly did not plant. Take for instance the parasitic vine that continually fights for a corner with my Indian Hawthorne or the patch of dandelions in the yard that seem to be resistant to any effort to eradicate them. For a while I was convinced they actually multiplied when weed killer was applied. In order to preserve and protect the intended beauty of the garden we’ve had to call the “weed man” for professional advice about the right intervention.

The Garden of My Daughter’s Heart and Life

Our precious daughter came home in December 2006. We celebrated her 12th birthday just a few weeks later, and she has been a joy and a blessing to our family in so many ways. As her “roots”

deepen in the "soil" of our family, I have come to appreciate and respect the garden of her heart and life. This garden was planted and blossoming long before I knew her name or became her mother. There are so many beautiful things in the garden of my daughter's heart and life—lovely things I did not plant! I was not there to see her first step, her first time to run, jump or climb, yet I have discovered that she is an amazingly fast, skilled athlete, and a graceful dancer. I did not hear her first words, but she has incredible language skills and is fluent in both English and Russian. Once she was home I discovered she could crochet, sew and cook. I have come to admire her strong work ethic, exhibited through diligence and determination—all qualities modeled for her half a world away. And I did not teach her to read, ride a bicycle or build snowmen, yet she loves to keep illustrated journals, ride bikes with no hands and build astounding things out of snow.

As with my backyard garden, there are also other things in the garden of my daughter's heart and life that I did not plant but cannot ignore. There are hard things that do not give life and instead seem intent to steal the beauty and joy from her victories. There are the fast-growing vines of fear and loss that try to choke out the trust and sense of permanence that has blossomed between us. And then there is the stubborn root of self-reliance that impedes vulnerability and healthy attachment. Nurturing the beauty and healthy growth in my daughter's heart and life requires constant vigilance, regular work and the humility and willingness to call upon and utilize available resources (much like the "weed man") when needed.

In this ongoing effort to help bring forth our daughter's beauty and hold at bay the "weeds" in her life, I've relied upon amazing support from other adoptive families and our church, as well as books, conferences and skilled counselors. But by far the most valuable resource—for me and for her—is the Master Gardener. The garden in our backyard did not come to be by chance. It was carefully designed and created for a purpose. The same is true of our daughter. Acknowledging God as the One who designed her unique and precious life has created a bridge from her past to the present and enables us to continue traveling this journey toward a hope-filled future. He knows better than anyone, including my daughter herself, what things are buried deep in the garden of her heart, and He desires to see those things that He planted burst into life and beautiful color.

As the seasons of life change I know there will be many more surprises that will blossom forth from my daughter's heart and life. Some will spring forth with life and beauty; others will seek an unsuspecting moment to yield patches of doubt and insecurity. Trusting His skill and purpose gives me courage and hope as I watch my daughter's heart and life bloom and stand amazed at His Master Plan.

Real Hope in the Balance

The challenges, problems and pain that our children face are real, and as a result, they affect us as parents as well. These challenges impact the whole child; and therefore, we must be willing to engage and embrace our children (and ourselves!) holistically. At the same time, we must always remember there are no quick fixes—merely changing behaviors will not accomplish what is needed. Our goal must be nothing less than healing for the whole child. Much like our own journey of spiritual healing and maturity, the healing we desire for our children will be a process, and it must be anchored by hope—*real hope*.

Fundamental to this real hope is an understanding that our children need a healthy and consistent balance of both nurture (affection, compassion, mercy) and structure (rules, limits, boundaries). Put another way, our children need a balance between connecting (nurture) and correcting (structure). As a result, the challenge is to identify what your child is really saying and what your child really needs. If we give a child structure (rules and correction) when she needs nurture (affection and mercy), we damage her ability to trust. If we give a child nurture when she needs structure, we limit her ability to grow. Therefore, we must learn to see our children and understand what they need in all of their being.

I believe this is similar to how God relates to us as His children. Using a balance of both nurture (His tender mercies) and structure (His guiding hand directing and correcting), He kindly, yet firmly, leads us into a right relationship with Him. I love the way *The Message* reflects the words of Paul in describing how God handles us, His children: “God is kind, but he’s not soft. In kindness he takes us firmly by the hand and leads us into a radical life-change” (Romans 2:4). As parents, we too must lovingly, intentionally and firmly take our children by the hand and lead them into a relationship of trust and healing. It is through this process, and as a result of this renewed relationship, that we and our children will discover real, life-changing hope.

More Questions to Consider and Discuss:

- 1. Thinking back to Cheryl’s story, “The Gardens of Life,” what are some of the beautiful things (i.e., characteristics, traits, qualities, etc.) that are present in your child’s life? What are some of the “weeds” in your child’s life that need to be attended to?**
- 2. What are some of the ways that God has nurtured (i.e., connected with) you in your relationship with Him? What are some ways that He has provided structure for (i.e., corrected) you?**
- 3. Has there been someone in your life or someone that you have observed or been influenced by that exhibited this balance of nurture and structure? How did they do it? What impact did it have?**

4. Think of an example when your child might have needed or even been asking for (whether with words or behaviors) one type of interaction (nurture or structure) and you provided the other. What was the result for him/her? What was the result for you?