

The Way Back Home

by Kathleen Smith

Have you ever had a child in your care become lost? Have you ever felt the terrible anxiety that fills you when there is even the slightest possibility that one of the children in your care might be in danger? Have you ever known the extreme darkness of pain associated with people in your life who have chosen a path that is so widely diverse from your own that it fills you with terror and dread? If you have felt any or all of these things then you are probably very normal. You are also probably a parent, but not necessarily. These things can be a part of anyone's life. The question is: What do we DO?

As a mother, I have felt these feelings many times. I also felt them many times as a child. I grew up in a home with an alcoholic Father and a working mother, and with siblings who struggled between those two dramas, as I did. Each in our own way was trying to solve the riddle of what to do when your life is in chaos. Mostly, we just coped. Mostly it was not successful. Mostly it just caused more pain. Some of us even began acting out in the same way our parents were. Some went into addiction, some into denial, some into different forms of aggression, either against themselves or someone else. None of it was very productive of healing or happiness.

When I began my own family, I still did not have the answer, though I had the gospel and many more coping skills. As a child, my coping skill had been to get away from the drama. I left home and almost never went back. I was dealing with it by NOT dealing with it. It worked, sort of. Still it was a cop-out and I knew it. But I did not have all the answers, or even what felt like SOME of the answers! There seemed to be too much drama, too much pain, too much heartache. As a mother, I still did not know what to do about it much of the time. So when my children began to grow up and act out their stories and choices, I discovered that all the drama of my childhood was being acted out in my own living room! I did my best to cope with it, to teach to it, to face it, but still it persisted. It was, perhaps, somewhat better than my childhood had been and that was some comfort. I mean, they did not have an alcoholic father, and I was staying at home, but beyond that, I was still in the same emotional state as my mother; i.e. I really did not have the solution for the feelings of pain, heartache, anger, fear, worry, and despair that come seemingly automatically when you have children who make choices that are outside of the realms of your ability to deal with emotionally or judiciously.

Then I had a crisis day. Actually I was having crisis day after crisis day, but this particular one was the one that pushed me into what began to be the solution to my dilemma. My dilemma was this: I could not reconcile what my children were doing with what I was taught to DO about it. This was what happened on THE crisis day: I found my son, who was somewhere around two years old, (and he had 5 other siblings) playing on the roof of our home. This isn't just, Oh dear! Johnny has gotten into the cookie jar again! No. This was on the roof and he was two! But this day was different from the other days when I had found him on the roof, and there were many I am sorry to say. This day was different because I realized on that day that there was no amount of punishment, and I had tried several, that would be sufficient to induce him to NOT play on the roof. Mentally, emotionally, and spiritually, I was at my wit's end.

My son, in the calmest, sweetest voice, which I can still recall, said to me: Mom, why are you so mad? That was it. I broke down crying, and wondering as he was: Why WAS I so mad? Well, I put my arms around my young son. I apologized for spanking him for going on the roof, and then I let him go. I turned from the incident and went to my room and shut the door. It was thinking time! So I thought and thought. Why WAS I angry? Was I afraid for HIS safety? Certainly I was. But there was something else. I realized that I was also afraid of what would happen to ME if anything happened to HIM! I was afraid that I would be thought a bad parent. I was afraid that someone might take my

children away! I was afraid that they might put me in jail for negligence or some such nonsense. I realized that I was desperately afraid of a LOT of things. This fear was driving me to punish my son for a behavior that obviously was not ideal, but that was not particularly intrinsically bad, which is why HE could not understand.

What happened then, changed the course of my Motherhood forever. When I realized all of those things, a voice inside me said: It is not YOUR JOB to punish your children. That is MY job. (I assumed this was God speaking.) I answered, as any of you might have answered: Then what do I DO! He said: Your job first and foremost is to love them. Your second job is to teach them the truth. If you do those two jobs, I can take it from there. In my fear, I whined: But will that be enough? And he replied: Try it and see. So I did.

I went right out and retrieved my son. I got down on my knees and apologized again (that is very important, mothers) for spanking him. I then told him of HIS responsibility to be obedient when his mother has offered him a reasonable request. I then shared with him some of the concerns I had about him being on the roof. I expounded a little bit on the things that might happen to ME should he still continue to go on the roof, even if nothing happened to HIM. I let him know how dangerous it COULD be, and warned him that if he decided to go onto the roof again, he ought to take extra precautions and definitely stay away from the edge. I talked for about five minutes, because, after all, he was VERY young. But this was what I was instructed to do. He was a bright boy, smarter than most, and I saw recognition and assent in his eyes. I knew that, at least on some level he was understanding me.

After I did that, my heart was at peace. It was a peace I had not known before, as a mother. I knew that God was with my child. I knew that I had done MY part, and that now he was in God's hands, because I knew that I could not be everywhere. I knew that my son knew that it was HIS responsibility to be smart about the roof, and he promised to do so. I was elated and joyful.

From that day on, I did not see my son on the roof, unless I ASKED him to go there! It was amazing! He learned a healthy respect for height, and as he grew, he became quite useful to us in things like retrieving items from the roof, repairing broken antennas, and any number of things for which he became a great benefit to us. It strengthened my relationship with him, and from that day to this, I know that HE knows that HE is responsible for HIM. I still love him, watch him, care about him, and certainly pray for him, but I no longer carry the burden of worry about his behavior.

This is a small example, which changed how I viewed discipline in my home, however, now I will address the seemingly larger problem of having a child who has chosen a path in their life that seems detrimental to the entire structure of your existence and that of your family. Many things could be considered as belonging in that realm, so I will let you fill in the blank. WHATEVER your child is capable of is what is in there. This could be great or small, obvious or subtle, but it does not matter. What I am going to teach you now will allow YOU to live a happy, productive, and purpose-driven life, no matter what your child is doing or not doing. It will allow you to be free from the emotional bondage and baggage that too often accompanies parenthood especially as your children grow older and more able to make life-altering decisions.

To be honest, we actually came to this planet with the single objective of exercising our agency. So why, when our children begin to do just that, does it seem like the end of the world! The answer lies in the fact that we are none of us separate. We are all connected by the unseen but not unmeasured energetic field that is our universe. There is no place that is separate. Thus, when one person acts, speaks, thinks, feels, chooses, lives or dies, we are ALL affected. This is especially true of our families and people 'close' to us. They are connected by stronger energetic bonds that include time spent together, common memories, common beliefs, common heritage. These commonalities give us strength in unity, but if broken, either by death or by the breaking with a belief, then there is pain. That pain comes from the loss of connections in our brain and soul which were made together with those people.

As an example: Growing up where I did in North Dakota, there was a strong sense of tradition and loyalty where weddings were concerned. I did not know this until I got married and was letting people know that my wedding would be taking place a thousand miles away from where the majority of my family was living. Not only that, but it would take place in a place that they could not attend because they were not of my faith. Up until that moment, my extended family were happy to let me live and make choices, but when I ran contrary to a strong belief and tradition, then it was as though I had just allowed a bear to enter the cave of my ancestors and no one felt 'safe' anymore. It was painful for BOTH of us to consider the prospects of moving forward after such a death of commonality between us.

You will of course agree that children, after they reach the age of accountability, have the opportunity, nay, the RIGHT to choose the path they will follow. That right is about the most sacred thing we have. Not even parents are allowed to touch it. And God himself set the age of accountability at 8. NOT 18! So, by the time those children are 8, you had better have given them a lot of teaching about HOW to use that agency! After they are 8, coercion and force become increasingly difficult, and finally impossible. Yet, there are millions of parents who attempt it on a daily basis until their child leaves their home. Teaching, discipleship (which is true discipline), love, example, opportunities, trust, and counsel are the hallmarks of what God expects of parents.

And please forgive me if I also ask you to refrain from bringing up the passage in Mosiah where he says: "You will not allow your children..." . Mothers and Fathers, this was not license to compel! These were OUTCOMES based SOLELY upon YOUR obedience to the doctrine of repentance and remission of SIN! These are not commands, they are fruits. People foolishly try to produce the fruits without first growing the tree! All you get then is fake fruit that no one likes.

OK, now that we know what NOT to do. I can share with you what you CAN do. This is the really good news! So, let's say you have a child who has "Gone off the deep end" so to speak. Let that be whatever it is. And, like my story above, you are feeling a bit of loss of reputation, in addition to the real feelings of fear, despair, frustration and perhaps anger because of what they have done or are doing. Then you look up to heaven and all around you and ask: WHAT CAN I DO? HOW CAN I HELP? WILL ANYTHING HELP? WHAT ARE THE ANSWERS?

And we are not without answers. Perhaps every General Conference I have attended since I became an adult has some mention of this challenge which is faced by everyone at some point in their lives. It is so general as to be a cliché. And what could be worse than turning your ultimate pain into a cliché for people to repeat ad nauseum? The answers, which are true, are that we have hope that at some point, all will be well. But for now, we wait. Oh yes, then there is this one: Hate the sin, not the sinner. Or this: Just love them. Or this: Never give up. Or: Miracles can happen, just keep believing.

All of those are good, true and right. But my heart kept asking me one question: What about the pain that never goes away? What is the answer for here and now? What in the world can I DO? In my agony, through many years of pain and study and pondering, I have found the answer to those three questions. All that I have shared so far is part of the journey that I had to make in order to find these answers, so I have shared it with you in order that you might have a better understanding of where this came from and where it is going. Now we can begin the healing process.

STEP 1

Look at the challenge. Look it in the face. Admit and accept that it is what it is and assign responsibility for it as best you can. Think moral responsibility i.e. agency. Whose CHOICE was this? Who is still making the choices? Refrain from equivocating about this. Even if it no longer seems that

they are capable of making choices at this point, continue to assign responsibility wherever possible. If you have to, put it on paper, so you can see it in black and white.

STEP 2

Look very closely at YOUR reaction to this challenge. TAKE responsibility for YOUR choices. If YOU have reacted to this with anger, fear, frustration, doubt, worry, disgust, cynicism, or hatred, then admit it and TAKE RESPONSIBILITY for it. Remember that these are sins of the heart and will consume and destroy your life. You are not the victim here, unless you CHOOSE to be. THIS IS THE MOST DIFFICULT PART! Your natural man wants to justify feeling these things. They come upon you sometimes automatically. It feels like you have no choice, no control. The truth is, you have a say here. The first step is to admit that you have felt these things and take responsibility for them.

STEP 3

Once you have done STEP 2, you are ready to move forward. This is where YOU GET TO DO SOMETHING! Here is the first thing you get to do: Repent. Yup. Repent. Once you have admitted that you are or have been angry, frustrated, resentful, etc. you get to go to God and ask forgiveness. Remember now, that the best way to teach a child is by example. When YOU go to God for forgiveness of YOUR sins and find forgiveness, then guess who is going to FEEL that? Yes, your child will FEEL that, because you are connected. But, you are not doing this FOR them necessarily. YOUR life is YOUR life. THEIR life is THEIRS. YOU do this because it's a good idea and it will bring you peace. Plain and simple. If you honestly take those heart sins to God, lay them on the alter in full humility, and, Godly sorrow for having sinned, then He forgives you. This was why you could not find peace in the past. You were always thinking that THEY needed to repent, when for YOU to be happy, YOU must repent of YOUR sins. How can we think that in order for US to be happy SOMEONE ELSE has to repent? Oops! So Basically, we have sinned because someone else has sinned, and the natural man thinks that this is fine. But, obviously, it is not. In order to forgive someone else, we must repent of anything we have done in REACTION to their sin. And Forgive we must. But it is a gift, not an act. And the gift is only bestowed AFTER we have repented of our sins and ASKED for that wonderful gift. When you DO that, He bestows the gift, which is the POWER to forgive.

STEP 4

Now that you have repented, and have received a remission of your sin, (in other words, you have no desire to commit it again and you actually feel like taking a shower to wash off the old residue) and you have received the gift of the power of God that you might truly forgive, then you are ready for the next phase, which is the impact phase. Mothers and Fathers, you have power in your hearts that you have not yet even BEGUN to tap! This power, when activated through heart-felt prayer, gratitude and true, pure, Christ-love, is the most powerful thing in the universe. Once you have repented, your heart is now free of the shackles that bound it down to the feelings of despair. Now that it is free to feel joy again, your job is clear. You could not see it before because of the cloud of sin that shrouded your heart in doubt, fear and unbelief. This is the results of sin. What you can do now is to begin to express your most powerful thoughts and feelings of gratitude to your Heavenly Father. But, we have not really been taught how to do this. So I will teach you. I will do so with the words that came to me as I went through this 4 STEP process. As You read these aloud, ask your heart to feel the words with your WHOLE heart, now that it is not clouded with all of the pain. Put on some beautiful, uplifting,

peaceful music quietly in the background. Speak with confidence and a smile. FEEL your heart open, ask it to open, and teach it to open, as you say the words of Gratitude.

STEP 5

When Jesus came to the tomb of Lazarus, he did a wonderful thing. Remember that Lazarus had been dead for four days! But when he came to the tomb he found his friends there, weeping. So he wept for them. It is alright to weep for your loss. But then he does something that is too often overlooked. This is crucial for us, wondering what we can DO when it seems all hope is lost. The thing Jesus did was he said: “Father, I thank thee that thou has heard me.” THEN he said: “Lazarus, come forth!” He did not thank his Father AFTER the miracle, but before! This is what we are now going to do!

Say out loud:

I now recognize my responsibility for my own thoughts and feelings.

I now acknowledge the feelings I have had which were painful to me, like anger, fear, resentment, disgust, hatred, frustration, worry, stress, panic, resistance, self-doubt, self-hatred, despair, or loss of love toward God, myself or any of his children.

I now repent of these my sins and ask for forgiveness, and for the power of God to forgive all who have trespassed against me.

I now commit that from now on, I will refrain from ALL of these sins and love God with All my Heart.

From now on:

I thank God for everything.
I thank thee for thy mercy.
I thank thee for thy love.
I thank thee for thy guidance
Sent from heaven above.

I thank thee for the power to forgive and I ask thee for that power now, so that I can be free from the sins of all men, and find forgiveness for my own sins.

I thank thee for sending love to my children.
I thank thee for thy mercy toward my children.
I thank thee for sending the Savior to save all of thy children.

I thank thee for giving us hope.
I thank thee for rescuing me and my children.
I thank thee for never leaving them or me alone in the dark.

I thank thee for thy infinite mercy in behalf of me and my children.
I thank thee for shouldering the burden of sin for all those who repent.
I thank thee for bringing your lost sheep back to the fold, in your own arms.

I thank thee for coming to save me.
I thank thee for never giving up on me, or my children.
I thank thee for thy love, sent out to each of thy children, including me.

I thank thee for healing our hearts and our minds.
I thank thee for being there for us even in our darkest hours.
I thank thee for always providing a way back to thee when we go astray.

I thank thee for thy infinite patience in waiting for us to call for help.
I thank thee for being an infinite, loving Father with no bounds to thy love.
I thank thee that I am never beyond thy loving and watchful care and help.

I thank thee for sending me one of thy children to care for, love, and nurture.
I thank thee that thou art mindful of our every need in every moment of every day.
I thank thee that thine infinite power is manifest in our lives on a daily basis.

I thank thee that we are thine, forever.
I thank thee that thy power emanates from every blade of grass and every living thing.
I thank thee for our Savior, Jesus Christ, our Good Shepherd who always watches His sheep.

I thank thee that NONE of thy children is lost to thee.

If you truly believe, in your heart, that God has all of this power, then you will continue to thank Him in advance for these wonderful blessings and so many more, which we know he is actually exercising right now in our behalf, but in order for us to SEE them, WE have to cleanse OUR hearts of all debris that is clouding our vision of a loving Heavenly Father who is capable of SO MUCH MORE than we have yet imagined.

I commend this to you in the Faith of our Lord Jesus Christ. He is the source of all light, truth, peace and every good thing. May the Lord Bless you and your family forever!