

*Lesson One*FAITH IS
THE GREATEST
LIFE ADVANTAGE

To be a parent is to know about hopes and dreams. Just watch the parents of any newborn. That doughy, diapered baby-body is barely home from the hospital before Mom and Dad are discovering evidences of genius intelligence or prodigious musical talent or some other sign that their child is exceptional.

“Did you see how he smacked that ball? What an eye for a two-year-old. Hey! Hey! Hey! Sammy Sosa, you’re history.”

“She colors all day long! Her color palette is reminiscent of Monet. Maybe we should get her into the three-year-old art classes at the community center. No, that might hold her back. We’d better look into private lessons to maximize her giftedness.”

Parents are to be forgiven for such inflated ideas. After all, it’s natural for us to want great lives for our children. And so we look for signs of giftedness—genius IQ, athletic prowess, ease in making friends, a quick wit, the ability to articulate, stunning beauty that launches ships, or a special moneymaking bent—something unique or outstanding that will help our children in life. Then, when promise

peeks out from their early years, we eagerly invest our financial resources and energy into their potential. What family hasn't organized its schedule around sports activities, art or music lessons, speech team, or drama practices and performances? Who hasn't watched (or maybe even occasionally experienced) a passion for a child's having a leg up in life that turns normally sane adults into aggressive sports maniacs or pushy backstage moms or dads?

Our daughter-in-law, Kailey, teaches extracurricular music lessons in preschools. She has told us that after only a month or two of lessons, some parents ask, "Is my child musically gifted?" Then, if they suspect that the child is not *outstandingly* gifted, it is not uncommon for them to withdraw him from music lessons and enroll him in another type of class where he *might* be "discovered" as exceptionally gifted. And most of these children are just two- and three-year-olds!

If you and I are honest, we'd admit that we understand this strong desire. We've felt that pull with our own kids. It seems that dreaming ambitious dreams for our children is a major drive, an inescapable parental force. After all, what is better than having a dream for a child come true?

We have a friend we'll call Jack who has worked at hard manual labor all his life. His life story is told in his handshake—straightforward, callused, and bone-crushing strong. But lately Jack has been living a dream through the life of his son. His son, Tim, is a gifted baseball pitcher and honor roll student. During Tim's senior year in high school, he received an appointment to the United States Military Academy at West Point. But the father's dream was only beginning. In the spring of his senior year, Jack's son was also drafted by a professional baseball team, with a signing bonus of \$150,000—enough money to attend college anywhere when Tim's baseball days are through.

What a trip! Jack is seeing his hopes and dreams for his child come true beyond his wildest imagination.

IS MY CHILD GIFTED?

Why do we want so much for our children? Maybe at the heart of all this hope is the strong desire for our children to have better lives

than our own. We resonate with such dreams because we are typical parents—wanting more for our children than we had in our own lives. And so, through the years, Valerie and I have held this kind of “blessing vigil” over the emerging lives of our own two sons—a time of watching and recognizing their talents, all of which are gifts from God.

As we write, beside us on the desk is evidence of “giftedness” from our oldest son’s childhood. It still amazes us. During the opening week of a summer sculpting class, Brendan, only seven at the time, fashioned his first sculpture from tinfoil. Two soccer players stand poised to kick a ball. Right legs are raised and extended behind the bodies for optimum power kicks; arms balance the perfectly proportioned aluminum bodies. Though we are adults, we could not have captured that moment half as well as our young son. *Where did this come from? Not from us. Our proud hearts proclaimed, Aha . . . So that’s what this child is about! A sculptor. He’s more gifted than we are. How amazing! How wonderful.*

“Hey! Hey! Hey! Rodin, you’re history!”

It was our first clue about the uniqueness of this son.

We also glowed with pride when our second son, Justin, walked on a stage for the first time and sang with all the confidence of a seasoned adult. *Stage presence! You can’t take your eyes off him. He’s a natural. So that’s what this child is about. A performer. Where did that come from? He’s more gifted than we are. How amazing! How wonderful.*

“Hey! Hey! Hey! Brad Pitt can’t even sing.”

Parents delight in their first discoveries about the potential of a child. It’s as if a wonderful stranger has been living in their house and they are getting to know him or her. She’s balanced and steady. Maybe it’s a sign of a high emotional IQ. He has lots of friends. Everyone loves him. Maybe some relational genius is starting to show.

THE BEST KIND OF GIFTEDNESS

But of all the dreams Valerie and I have held for our children, through the years we have become more convinced of the importance of one dream above all others—that our child be gifted in faith. *No parental passion is more worthy for any parent’s child than that the child should be gifted in faith.*

Faith? Why faith? Because no other life blessing is more crucial and determinative. Next to faith, all other blessings pale. Faith is life's most outstanding asset. It gives the greatest leg up in life.

Yes, faith is life's greatest advantage. Why? Because faith boosts other giftedness to supernatural levels. Faith sustains life—it is the food of the soul. A child shaped to faith is a child who is greatly blessed!

The farther down the parental path we travel, the stronger the hidden truth about faith emerges. Faith makes an incredible difference in a life. A trusting relationship with God is life's greatest treasure.

If you are tempted to shrug that off as merely “God talk,” look for a moment at some of the most commonly desired dreams parents hold for their children and measure them next to the remarkable benefits of faith.

For instance, think about intellectual giftedness. That's high on the what-we-want-for-our-kids list of most parents. What parent hasn't dreamed that his or her child would be brilliant in some area—smart enough to win a full-ride scholarship before the college bills start flooding in? After all, brains do give a kid a major leg up in life.

But this highly desired gift of human intelligence is also potentially limited. Without God's influence on your children, their intelligence is just brain cells—sometimes poorly used, misused, or not used at all. There is a spiritual component to intelligence that is far more than brain cells: *inspiration*. This factor often makes the difference between someone who is just a card-carrying member of Mensa (scoring in the top 2 percent of IQ and verifying sheer brilliance) and someone whose genius is inspired to labor and sacrifice on a focused cause that will change the world for the better. High IQ without the ability to tap into God's wisdom is a highly limited resource—one that always falls far short of its world-impacting promise.

Another perceived advantage-in-life category that parents commonly pursue passionately is athletics. Certainly most of us feel parental pride over a kid with a great soccer leg, a dead-aim basketball shot, or lightning speed that's an advantage in almost any sport—right? That's great! We don't want to pop this bubble for anyone. As a dad and former “jock” myself, I really understand this one. But while you're basking in the glow in the stands at the high school football games or reading all about the sports star with your last name in the

local paper's sports section, consider this. Athletic ability is merely superior coordination unless it is joined by courage.

It is courage, which comes from deep within, that presses a talented body beyond physical endurance to the "impossible win."

What makes the difference between a talented quitter and a world-class athlete? It's courage, tenacity, and endurance—all inner qualities of God-given strength. When tapped into, they take human potential to a whole new level. There's a very real spiritual dimension to these interior qualities.

Athletic ability and a well-trained body are great gifts. But don't overlook the importance of having a spiritual edge as well—the ability for your children "who hope in the LORD [to] renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint" (Isaiah 40:31). In life, it's often faith—that spiritual edge—that achieves the impossible win.

Here's a different parental perk for some moms and dads: a child who stops traffic with his or her good looks. Do people catch their breath and frequently remark, "What a gorgeous child!" Are you thinking beauty pageants and college scholarships? Well, the world loves a beautiful face, but consider that without faith, when outer beauty fades, all may seem lost. How much better to hope for a beautifully souled child—one who shines with the character of God, a child whose adult loveliness could never be compromised by aging or wrinkles. What a difference faith makes in all the giftedness areas of life!

How about this one? Anybody have a kid who can make, save, and turn a buck? Dreaming about early retirement funded by your little financial genius? Then think for a moment about life on easy street. Even the resources of great wealth stand powerless to buy the most precious life commodities of love and contentment and belonging—all outgrowths of the spirit and soul. We are utterly convinced that a secular life, even one with great privilege, is the most underprivileged life of all. Secular thinking reduces life to the cold, hard facts of cause and effect. Mystery and miracle cease to be. Awe and wonder are topics left unexplored in secular conversation.

Life without faith is bleak. You can have all the financial advantages this world can offer, but without faith, you are life challenged—as impoverished in soul as any homeless person is lacking materially

while living on the streets. Spiritually neglected children suffer a serious form of impoverishment regardless of their material blessings. The long-range implications may be more damaging than any other form of neglect a child can suffer.

A PARENT'S BEST DREAM

A kid shaped to faith is a parent's best dream. Think about it: faith boosts all other life blessings to new levels. A parent with a child shaped to faith discovers a tremendous return on that investment—for a lifetime! If the truth would get out, if our parenting culture actually grasped the benefits of faith, more and more moms and dads would be signing up their kids for lessons in it as soon as they could. Parents would be demanding extracurricular nursery school classes, hoping to discover *spiritual* giftedness in their children. Most of us who are parents would be seeking private tutoring in faith so our kids would excel in it. Many of us would move anywhere, invest any amount of money, sacrifice whatever would be necessary to shape our kids to faith.

Faith provides a major leg up in life. But there is more. Faith will boost other life gifts. True. But still there is more. To live life at its best, faith is as necessary as food or water. Faith sustains life.

Faith is the soul's food. Let us explain.

WHAT FAITH IS

What is faith? It is the recognition that God is with us and for us. Faith is the spotlight that shines into life's darkest moments and shows the way through the seemingly impassable abyss. "Take courage. Be optimistic," faith declares.

Faith is the interior muscle that refuses to give up even when swamped by tears and discouragement. "Keep moving. Don't quit. Don't despair," faith cheers.

Faith is life's sweetener. It is the midwife of hope, the "birther" of comfort. Faith reminds us: "There is meaning in your life. There's a holy reason to everything that happens to you. You matter to God."

Faith is the crazy courage that moves the mountain that reason

declares is unmovable. Faith gives the spirit wings and the soul empowerment to believe that mystery works beyond what is apparent. “You are more than body. You are intrinsically spiritual. You are eternally precious to God,” faith reminds us.

Faith is the limitless spiritual resource when human reserves are depleted. It is the smile of the Spirit, the hug of God, the knowing beyond knowing. To live a life of faith, to experience life as a friend of God is to live the most privileged life of all. Faith transforms human giftedness into something more—it introduces the resources of God into a life.

That’s why Scripture describes faith as “the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen” (Hebrews 11:1 KJV). This same text is translated in the *New International Version*, “Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.” In other words, faith or trust in God is foundational to a hopeful spiritual existence. Faith is the determining gift that makes the difference between a sustained life and a depleted life. Faith supersedes and influences all other gifts life has to offer a child. That’s why a faith-filled life is the worthiest dream a parent can hold for a well-loved child.

Understand, we are not talking about the kind of faith that casually tips its hat toward God, or faith as a life additive that’s nice for certain older people looking for something to do; nor are we describing faith as a required belief system that is the basis for membership in a type of social club. None of these. We are talking about faith that shapes a life to God and His heart. Nothing less.

BEING SUCKED IN TO SOCIETY’S VALUES

When we first had children, like most parents, we wanted to give them the best opportunities we could afford. We eagerly sought out the wealth of advice available to parents—about nutrition, health care, helping a child mature socially, optimal intellectual development, issues that contribute to the emotional well-being of a child, and more. We read tons of books. We listened to the experts. We asked questions. We moved to the best school system we could afford. We supplemented our children’s classroom education with outside lessons. We were soccer, baseball, football, gymnastics, and track and field parents.

Regularly we provided the host home for our children's friendships and many of their activities. What we were doing on behalf of our boys was comparable to what we perceived most of the other parents we knew were doing for their kids.

There was nothing wrong with those activities, of course. But in the fray of all this well-intended activity, we have to confess that at times we were distracted in our parenting process. Living in today's culture, it's sometimes frighteningly easy to be satisfied with less than the very best.

Too frequently, unwittingly, we bought in to values we didn't even hold. We needed to realign our dreams, our energies, and our passions with our real values.

Have you noticed—it's so easy to be sucked in to society's values. We were faithful churchgoers. In our family life, God was always included—mealtime prayers, bedtime Bible stories, and playing Christian music and tapes were routine in our home. Of course, we believed that faith was very important—we were in full-time ministry! But in our pursuit of life advantage for our children we were often distracted from the foundational truth that our primary assignment was to parent the souls of our children. In a heartbeat we could be sucked-in to applying parental energy to every other possible place of life advantage. Too many times, spiritual life and development were simply left to “come along for the ride.”

Looking back it is somewhat painful to realize that those “Aha . . . So this is what our child is about!” moments were clearly there for successes in academics, sports, and similar kinds of achievements—in music, school elections, dramatics, art shows, whatever. Our Christmas letters always celebrated “blessings” such as these. The Bell fridge was clad in magnetized clumps of report cards, photographs, and the occasional newspaper clippings. We took joy in bragging about *those* developments to any family and friends who would indulge us and receive it with happiness. But reflecting, we now realize we sometimes failed to as clearly express “Aha!” over the signs of our children's emerging spirituality.

To be honest, the spiritual indicators were too frequently lost in the pursuit of today's culture values: grades, sports, and honors tied to other more tangible achievements.

YOUR PASSIONS . . . AND YOUR KIDS' VALUES

So, what's a parent to do?

First, clarify your passions. If you hold to the conviction that faith is the greatest life advantage, you must set your heart toward it. If a parent does not clearly pursue this core value with the kind of parental energy that goes to other try-to-get-a-leg-up-in-life categories, then faith may be perceived by children as having little or no value in real life.

Your passions shape your kids' values. Look at your heart. What passionate messages are you giving your kids? If your strongest passion is for sports, then the little ones in your home may be convinced that there's nothing more important in life than excelling athletically.

If good grades get your most enthusiastic "thumbs up," then be aware that your kids may develop a greater inclination toward the pursuit of rationality over spirituality.

If your energy goes primarily into musical achievements, don't be surprised if the dominant beat your children hear is not the rhythm of the soul.

If conversations around your dinner table are for the most part dominated by late-breaking news concerning cars, boats, vacations, and acquiring more and more and bigger and better—don't be shocked if your children grow up to become shameless materialists.

Kids just know. They read us at a deep intuitive level. Sometimes they read our passions better than we do ourselves. Our kids read us like a book. Our younger son, a recent college graduate, is expressing his faith in so many refreshing ways at this time in his life. He challenges our thinking, continually exposing us to alternative viewpoints and new ideas. He's also remarkably articulate and can evaluate our parenting. After an honest father-son talk that revealed some of our shortcomings, I playfully asked, "Well, in light of your observations about Mom and me, how come you turned out so good? How did you avoid the potential damage along the way?" Justin's answer provided a bittersweet insight to us. "Well, you and Mom did have a few parenting gaps through the years . . . but I also knew what you *really* cared about. You were passionate about faith in God; and you really cared about me. I never questioned that."

Whew! Relief. Thankfully, our core passions were perceivable and compensated for our gaps.¹

It seems children are intrinsically skilled at two things; happily for all of us, forgiveness is one. The other skill they seem to universally possess is the uncanny ability to clearly read their parents' passions. Say what you want, blow holy smoke to the sky, quote chapter and verse, but if passion is missing, they will sense what really matters to you. If faith is not "impassioned" by parents, a child quickly learns that spirituality is probably nothing that is worth much of a life investment, certainly not something worth the intensity of long-haul discipleship.

This is a slippery slope. We have learned to examine our hearts. What *do* we really care about? Are we honest about this? Are our passions authentically aligned with our core values? We know how easy it is to lose focus on spiritual values—to convey to our kids, even when we didn't really believe it, that other things were more earth-shatteringly important.

GOD GIVES FAITH, BUT PARENTS SHAPE IT

Once we began to understand how conveying our true passions impacted our children's faith formation, another unsettling truth about our role in our children's faith became clearer. Scripture speaks of faith as a mystery, ultimately a gift of God. Some have interpreted this truth almost passively—as if the parents are barely included in the process. This passive approach to faith formation completely misses the point. God gives faith, that's true. But parents shape it. Spiritual education in children that leads to true spiritual formation is about relationship more than curriculum. *Faith-shaped kids are developed most readily through faith-shaped parents.*

Parents, by far, play the most defining role in a child's spiritual formation. Dad or Mom matter more than peers, environment, school, church, or any other kind of formal religious education.

How parents matter in a child's faith formation is illustrated in Jesus' parable of the sower and the seed. Let's look at this parable through the family grid. Jesus' image of young seedlings and the tender care they require to grow into maturity are appropriate pictures of the early faith of a child. In this parable Jesus warns of the hazards of young faith, a

faith in germination, a faith without mature spiritual rootedness—the perfect description of the faith of children in formation.

A farmer went out to scatter seed in a field. While the farmer was scattering the seed, some of it fell along the road and was eaten by birds. Other seeds fell on thin, rocky ground and quickly started growing because the soil wasn't very deep. But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched and dried up, because they did not have enough roots. Some other seeds fell where thornbushes grew up and choked the plants. But a few seeds did fall on good ground where the plants produced a hundred or sixty or thirty times as much as was scattered. (Matthew 13:3–8 CEV)

The implications for the parent's role in a child's faith formation are noteworthy. Apparently God plants the seeds of faith freely, even in places that are not reasonable for growth. You could say He is indiscriminate, desiring that all should come to Him. As the seeds of faith are scattered, we do not need to spend one ounce of worry concerning whether God can then grow the planted faith in our child's heart. He always does His part.

But outside factors matter. Before a child's faith is rooted—while it is young, tender, and fragile—a parent's job is both to watch for those outside destructive factors and to encourage the signs of spiritual life and growth. A parent tends what is tender. God gives faith. Parents shape it.

THE SPIRITUALLY AMBITIOUS PARENT

Through the years, Valerie and I learned to look for clues about who our children were becoming. We took note of their personalities. We noticed their life preferences and tendencies. But almost as a subtext, between the lines as it were, another watch began to take place. We began to observe our children's emerging souls. In no other area did the “emerging stranger” living in each child's developing personality amaze us more. This was fascinating. A subtle shift in our energies and priorities began to take place. Faith was not just a subtitle; it began to take on a main theme in our interest in our sons' development.

To use what may seem like an odd phrase, we became “spiritually ambitious” for our children—eager for them to have and to be all that God wanted for them. What exactly that entailed, we weren’t sure initially. But over time and with some intentionality, we learned what to look for. Was there evidence of life present? Was young faith struggling, wilting, or falling off? Were there signs of disease? Any invading pests? Was something thwarting or distracting them from spiritual growth? Were weeds choking out their emerging faith? Were there positive indicators of movement toward God? Was there new growth, a cutting edge learning curve in their tender young souls? Overseeing this whole process became our most joyful role—to foster what was forming spiritually. We were discovering that parenting a child’s soul is both a fascinating and sacred watch.

A PARENT’S FAITH: THE GROWTH MEDIUM FOR A CHILD’S FAITH

This book attempts to explain what we’ve learned about a parent’s unique position in a child’s spiritual life. Our point of view is that parents shape a kid’s faith primarily through the relational grid—as contrasted to formalized spiritual education or any other “methodical” approach. The daily sharing of family life gives you, as a parent, access to your child’s soul like no other person. If there’s authentic connectedness in the home, a child will benefit immensely, often not only to the point of faith but to a special spiritual sensitivity, even a kind of rare spiritual giftedness.

Living with faith-shaped parents provides children an opportunity for exposure to God and to a more mature faith. Until children have lived through their own God-rescued moments, until they recognize the signs of God’s leading and are spiritually mature, before they know how to trust God themselves, they will need to see that God is trustworthy based on the track record in their parents’ lives.

The spiritual growing medium that parents of faith provide for their children is their own faith. Children, with immature root systems, grow in the garden of their parents’ faith—and this day-by-day access is a tremendous advantage in life. Spiritual sensitivity in

children is often directly linked to the unique relationship that a child enjoys with a faith-filled parent.

As parents, look to become spiritual opportunists, finding ways “whether you’re at home or walking along the road or going to bed at night, or getting up in the morning” (Deuteronomy 11:19 CEV) to say, “This is my God. This is how you recognize Him working in your life. This is a sign He’s here with us. Learn to look at life from a bigger perspective than human eyesight. Trust God.”

You can learn to show your children how eternal truths can jump off the pages of Scripture into real life, how words from sermons can be especially intended for us, how God becomes a part of our daily inner dialogue through prayer. Recognize that you share a walk of faith with your children, not just a set of beliefs. It’s as if we parents have a well-traveled map of the soul that we share with our children, encouraging the most fascinating journey of all—the inner journey of the human spirit toward God.

A key way to share that spiritual journey with your children is through spiritually focused family activities and special projects with them, both at home and away. The “Family Resource Articles” at the end of this book include user-friendly family tools such as “The God Hunt,” and “The Sunday Search” to help your children and you on that journey.

As parents tend the souls of their children, they give from their own inner beings the spiritual nourishment that keeps faith alive. The result of all this tending and soul care will be spiritually attached children—children connected to both their physical parents and God Himself. Trust with Dad or Mom (or better yet Dad *and* Mom) more easily transfers into trust with God. Such trust can make all the difference in the seed of faith growing to maturity through whatever life dumps out—through wind and fire, pestilence and overgrowth.

Be a spiritually involved parent, and your message to “trust God” will find a receptive place in your children’s hearts.

MORE THAN CHAUFFEURS

But even with the best of intentions, we parents can sometimes settle for lesser roles in our children’s spiritual lives. How subtly we can

become just the chauffeurs who get them to Sunday school, or the benefactors who pay the tuition for their Christian educations, or merely disengaged proponents of biblical standards, all the while being the biggest cheerleaders for every other aspect of their lives. Valerie and I understand this. We've lived there. With so many other pressing priorities and all the possibilities for spiritual "busyness," it's very easy to miss the hands-on work of shaping your children's faith—and not even noticing what's really taking root in their spiritual development.

Some children will never experience that closely connected spiritual relationship with their parents that can gift children with an intuition for God. Sadly, many of these "deprived" children will be from theologically sound "Christian" homes.

Don't misunderstand us. We honor and value Christian education in its many forms: Sunday schools, Christian day schools, church youth ministries, campus clubs, family camps, student Bible study groups. All are wonderful support resources for the believing home. Formal, concrete, cognitive learning has its place in faith formation, to be sure. But religious information must be converted to faith application in the private places of children's hearts. The information must jump off the page and into life. Typically, a parent is in the most intimate position to initiate and apply that process.

Whether a child can face life with courage, resourcefulness, tenacity, and joy often comes down to how his or her soul was parented.

EARLY SIGNS OF SPIRITUALITY

Parents can learn to read the early signs of emerging spirituality:

What's this pushing to the light? She loves to pray.

Look what's blooming here. He talks so freely to all of his friends about Jesus.

How wonderfully strong and tall she's growing toward God—singing out her heart to Him all the time.

Wow! He has more faith than we do sometimes.

Here's a tender heart of mercy forming—she wants to give all her toys to children who don't have any.

As you make discoveries like these along the way, Dad and Mom, stand up and cheer.

GARAGE OR FOREVER INVESTMENTS?

Looking back, we wish we hadn't spent a moment grieving over report cards or athletics or some of the other things in our children's lives that seemed so pressing and important. Our garage is a testament to the minimal return on some of our investments. We look at the bins and boxes that store their cast-off clothing and gear—small soccer jackets, football jerseys, baseball gloves, BMX dirt bikes—and realize that what was once hotly pursued, exciting for a season or a few years, has become just the unwanted remnants from their lives. For all the parental energy and investment in hopes and dreams our two boys received, those values are not lasting.

But think of faith! Our children—your children—can receive the greatest and most enduring of all of life's advantages—the gift of faith. Someday you will no longer have a direct role in your children's lives. Then, when your parental applause is silenced, when your cheering for them is only a remembered echo, faith will remain to comfort, guide, strengthen, and sweeten.

LIVING IN SPIRITUAL ANTICIPATION

The following prayer by Sir Francis Drake, the first Englishman to navigate the globe, captures the heart of the message we want to convey to fellow Christian parents throughout this book:

A PRAYER

Disturb us, Lord, when
We are too well pleased with ourselves
When our dreams have come true
Because we dreamed too little,
When we arrived safely
Because we sailed too close to shore.

Disturb us, Lord, when
With the abundance of things we possess
We have lost our thirst for the waters of life;
We have ceased to dream of eternity

And in our efforts to build a new earth,
We have allowed our vision
Of the new Heaven to dim.

Disturb us, Lord, to dare more boldly,
To venture on wider seas
Where storms will show your mastery;
Where losing sight of land,
We shall find stars.

We ask you to push back
The horizons of our hopes;
And to push us in the future
In strength, courage, hope and love.²

—Sir Francis Drake
December 1577

We invite you and your family to “get into our boat.” We are going to cast off from shore and travel into what might be uncharted waters for some. We hope you will travel spiritually with us for a while and let us share what we have learned about faith-shaped kids and their faith-shaped parents.

NOTES

1. You never know when your values may sink in. One of my most cherished possessions is a letter I received from Justin on Father’s Day 1999. I’ve actually carried it around in my briefcase for the past two years, and every couple of months will pull it out to reread and refresh my memory and soak in some of the encouragement it contains. The power of this letter ministers to a deep place in my soul and causes me to reflect on one of my all-time favorite assignments in this life—participating with Valerie in the parenting process of our two sons, Brendan and Justin.

This letter reminds me that children are incredibly gracious and forgiving, and that “love [in the truest sense!] covers a multitude of sins.” In his own handwriting Justin printed the letter in all caps. It reads:

JUNE 18,

1999

DEAR DAD,

HAPPY FATHER’S DAY!! IS MOM BACK FROM NORTH CAROLINA YET? I WOULDN’T WANT YOU TO SPEND FATHER’S DAY WITHOUT BOTH ME AND MOM, SO I’M HOPING SHE HAS RETURNED.

AND TODAY IS ALSO THE MARKING OF 29 YEARS OF MARRIAGE FOR YOU GUYS!! RIGHT? THAT IS AWESOME! THE MORE I GET

EXPOSED TO DIFFERENT FAMILIES, MARRIAGES, AND VALUE

SYSTEMS THE MORE I REALIZE HOW RARE AND WONDERFUL OUR FAMILY LIFE IS. THERE IS NO SENSE OF JEALOUSY, RESENTMENT, OR ANGER IN OUR FAMILY. IT HAS ALWAYS BEEN SEEN AS INAPPROPRIATE BEHAVIOR AND IS NOT TOLERATED. I HAVE ONLY FELT LOVE, ACCEPTANCE, AND SUPPORT WITH YOU DAD, AND I HOPE TO GIVE THAT SAME TYPE OF HEALTHY STABILITY TO MY WIFE AND KIDS. WHEN KAILEY TELLS US HOW EASY IT IS TO LIVE WITH BRENDAN I THINK YOU AND MOM CAN CLAIM RESPONSIBILITY. YOU GUYS SET A GREAT EXAMPLE!

SPECIFICALLY, ON THIS FATHER'S DAY . . . I THANK YOU FOR ALLOWING ME TO PURSUE MY DREAMS. YOU NEVER HAVE TRIED TO TALK ME OUT OF THINGS OR FORCE ME INTO BEING SOMEONE I AM NOT. THE LOVE THAT YOU SHOW MOM, BRENDAN, KAILEY, AND MYSELF IS CHRIST-LIKE, UNSELFISH AND GENUINE. THAT IS WHY I LOVE YOU IN RETURN, BECAUSE YOU LOVED ME FIRST.

THANKS FOR BEING A GREAT DAD,
JUSTIN

Lord, I don't know what to say except thank You for our children. They are gifts, treasures from You. Enable me, God, in the days to come to learn to be the person, father, husband, and leader You want me to be—for Christ's sake.

2. As adapted in a playbill of the 2000 Canadian Stratford Festival in Stratford, Ontario.