

Walking Your Family Through Pain

By Joe White

Closing Kamp on August 12 is always a bittersweet experience for me. I'm happy to get a minute to sit in my chair and scratch my Labrador retriever's ears, sleep in my own bed, sleep thru the night, and shed a little bit of the pressure for a while...but I'm mostly sad when Kamp closes, as the thought of saying "good-bye" to the Kampers I've grown to love for the previous 78 days drive out of the Kamp gates and turn this joyful, bustling place into a ghost town.

The summer of 2006 had been especially wonderful. On August 12th at 2pm, as my K2 staff and I worked feverishly to put the finishing touches on putting the Kamp to bed for the winter, I was working harder on the inside to put my roller coaster emotions to bed. I have never been good at saying "good-bye."

As about 50 of us "horsed" the huge volleyball court's canopy from its frame, somebody screamed, "there's a fire in the girls' cabin area. The camp is on fire." I raced to the cabin area where a black cloud of smoke rose angrily above the trees, and the flames tore through the beloved buildings that just a few hours before had been filled with indescribable laughter, love, lifelong friendships, and memories in the making. Tears and ashes filled my eyes as I made futile attempts to chase down the flames with a garden hose. The bucket brigade of loyal counselors and the parade of spewing fire extinguishers were no match for the wind-fueled flames that pursued building after building and giant oak tree after giant oak tree.

As I watched the awful site, my mind raced back to 1976 when a young, eager, naïve pair of almost newlyweds laid everything they had on the line and believed God for a miracle that we could build a teenage camp that would build strong Christian, teen leaders and rescue fallen kids from an eroding youth culture. To those pouring water on the flames around us, Kamp was burning up; to Debbie Jo and I, our dreams were going up in smoke.

As sad as that day was for me, it paled in comparison to the day I had to talk to my kids about leukemia and the doctors who had told me, "go home and get my house in order." It was the last day of Kamp and I couldn't give out the news until I could get face to face with my kids. I'll never forget the long flight to Seattle when Courtney was finishing grad school, knowing we would need to weep through a sleepless night together and process the nightmare. Then there was prostate cancer, the death of Debbie Jo's stepdad (she had lost her dad when she was 4 in a US Navy test pilot crash), then it was her mom, and then my dad.

But of all the tragedies a parent faces there is none (at least for Debbie Jo and I) as gut-wrenching and difficult as the pain we feel inside when a child is hurting; when the one you love more than life itself has fallen to the circumstances of this very, very difficult world in which we live. For Debbie Jo and I in our child rearing days, those episodes were numerous. Some lasted for days. Some for months. In one case, regarding a season of brokenness and depression for one of our children, the episode lasted for years.

As I write today, my phone just rang. It was my dear friend of many years, Dr. James Dobson. He called to pray and comfort. “Doc” addressed the letter I’m trying to write tonight well when he wrote his classic, ever-comforting masterpiece, “When God Doesn’t Make Sense.”

I’m in the home of a Kamp mom who recently lost her breasts in a double-mastectomy. Then as round after round of chemotherapy came to a conclusion and before the hair on her eyebrows even had a chance to re-grow, her dear friend and friend of her family took her own life and left her family and friends asking, “Why, why – where is God when life doesn’t make sense?”

Tonight, I asked this courageous Kamp mom the question many of our Kamp families are asking, “**How do you talk to your kids when their world is falling apart?**”

Courageously, with joyfully-focused eyes that have no eyelashes and rebuilding a body beat-up by difficult surgeries, she said, “As you love your kids back to their feet again, let them know that we don’t understand many things this side of Heaven, but God is **STILL** in control and reigning from His throne!”

I keep assuring my children of these verses from scripture, ‘And so Lord, where do I put my hope? **MY ONLY HOPE IS IN YOU.**’ (Psalms 39:7) ‘And He who sits on the throne said, “Behold, I am making all things new.’ (Revelations 21:5)

I admire that Kamp mom’s courage more than I can describe.

If not specifically today, many of you as parents will ask, or perhaps are asking tonight, and surely will ask it sometime in the future, “How do you talk to your kids when **SOMEBODY** lets you down? What do you say when a hero falls into sin? How do you talk so your kids will listen . . . how do you listen so your kids will talk?”

BECOMING AN EXCELLENT LISTENER

After decades of walking this perilous road with my kids and yours, I certainly do not make any claims of being a scientist in the difficult field of child psychology, instead, I

turn to the One who is the Great Physician. Our children's Creator emphatically reminds us, 'Be quick to hear; be slow to speak and slow to anger,' James 1:19. Piling on advice when your kids are hurting will slam the door as quickly and resolutely as anything I know.

Yesterday a man approached me. He was firm, confident and focused. He said to me, "How are you?" I wanted to say, "Fine" and move along. I looked inside my heart. I am sad, bewildered, and heartbroken. My eyes are heavy from lack of sleep. My heart is heavy for hurting kids. I have always taken kids' pain as my pain to a fault. I am just so sad for our hurting Kamp kids! They are my love and my life!

So, I said to the man, "Honestly? I am hurting."

He fixed his gaze on me and gave me a sermon on letting go. "You have got to give it to God. It all works for good. You can't worry. Worry is a sin. Yada, yada, yada . . ." I wanted to give him an old football shove and push him as far from me as I could. Every one of us who has ever walked through a valley of brokenness knows all too well that lectures and advice, no matter **HOW** well intended, only repel a hurting heart.

Then Dr. Dobson called and listened and he heard and comforted me. He assured me of his friendship and love for our Kamp – no matter what!

Your kids need ears that listen, a face that is caring and understanding. They need to know you are really, really hearing their heart.

"Tell me how you are feeling?" is question number one. Again, any advice or 'coaching' as precious thoughts come out of their mouth will turn off the faucet before enough water comes out to dampen the ground below.

It is far better to say, "Tell me about your sadness."

"Tell me about your pain, despair, or disappointment."

"What's it like for you right now?"

"What's going on inside of that heart of yours tonight?"

"If your feelings were a paint brush and life today was a canvas, describe the painting you would paint for me today?"

"Do you feel like a lost dog in the woods whose master left him out there and now there's nowhere to turn to find home again?" "Do you feel like a little kid in the hallway

of a busy high school where all these big kids are rushing in one direction and you're trying to squeeze through the crowd and find a doorway in the opposite direction?"

My neighbor and friend, Dr. Gary Smalley, says that helping a child create emotional word pictures for his or her feelings is the most powerful thing a parent can do if they want a child to know how to open up.

LOVE IS PATIENT

I remember when one of my boys was walking through the "valley of the shadow of death" as a teen and broken by the disappointments of this life. Night after night I tucked him in bed. Night after night I lay on the bed beside him. Night after night for months he would put his head on my chest and cry warm tears of deep remorse. I had very little to say, but a lot of time to listen and **FEEL** the pain and participate in this valley. Nothing will fix a child's broken and bewildered heart overnight but God. More often God works over a long period of time for long term results. A patient, caring parent who doesn't force the issues and demand short sound bite answers will not only carry a hurting child through the valley but will also develop a friendship with that child that will one day become one of the few, **BEST**, lifelong friendships that parent will ever know.

Today that same son is the most caring, empathetic man in my life.

As parents we've got to help our child **HOLD ON** to what **IS** true... God somehow uses our broken pieces of glass and glues those broken pieces miraculously into an astonishingly, beautiful, mosaic masterpiece. 'Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction so that we will be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God,' 2 Corinthians 1:4.

4:8it

Christian author, Kay Arthur says, "When in doubt, 4:8it."

"Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable – if anything is excellent or praiseworthy – think about such things." Philippians 4:8

Finally, as I close tonight, rest assured that a child's mom will someday fail in some way. A child's dad will fail in some way. A child's coach will fail someday. And yes, a child's hero will fail in some way. God never wanted us to have idols made of gold, silver, or even human flesh.

Years ago I was getting counsel from my daughter about apologizing to my son about a blunder that I felt like I needed to apologize for. I said to her, “I’m afraid his hero will die.” Those girls of mine are as sharp and candid as their mom, let me tell you. She quickly responded, “That’s ok, Dad, you’re not supposed to be his hero anyway, Jesus is.”

We will get through this trial together. I know many of our families are hurting. I’m hurting like only the news of fatal cancer has hurt me before, but **OUR STAFF AND I AM NOT QUITTING ON OUR KAMP KIDS AND OUR DREAM TO HELP CHANGE THEIR WORLD.** Walking away and throwing in the towel is **NOT** an option. We’re gonna stand together, grow together, and rebuild together.

By the way, what happened to that portion of Kamp that burned up in August 2006? A page from a counselors’ Bible actually flew out of one of the cabins in a plume of smoke. Someone placed it in my smoke-stained hands. It was from 2 Chronicles 20 – I still carry that torched page in my billfold today.

‘Do not be afraid or discouraged because of this vast army. For the battle is not yours, but God’s...Take up your positions; stand firm and see the deliverance the Lord will give you, O Judah and Jerusalem. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged. Go out to face them tomorrow, and the Lord will be with you.’ 2 Chronicles 20:15,17

The next summer those ashes were replaced with the most beautiful cabins, flower gardens, vibrant new trees, and a promise that we would always rebuild, we would always be there, we would always dream that we can prepare our kids, that we can repair and rebuild the culture that our kids are fighting to overcome, and we would never turn our back on kids who need us.

With deep resolve,

Joe White

PS If you believe as I do that memorizing scripture together with your kids is the most healing experience given by God, Psalm 46, Psalms 23, and Col 3:1,2 are as good as it gets.

Get Dr. Dobson’s book if you don’t already have it. (1-800-AFAMILY)