

7 TELLTALE MARKS

THE MUD MARKS TRACED THE PATH of little feet that had swaggered boldly across the gold carpet, marched around the freshly washed kitchen tile, meandered down the hall, stopped at the bathroom sink—then ended in scattered clods of earth on the porch and down the front steps. It all must have happened in the space of my quick dash to a “borrowing neighbor.”

“Joel! Jo-el Da-vid!” I called. My mother-mind had quickly assessed to which culprit the mud marks belonged: the great house despoiler, Joel David Mains. Two small figures came bounding joyously from the back yard, their snowsuits plastered with mud—my son and his pal Georgie. Georgie was five, but in stature he was eight, causing him to lope and stumble like an adolescent puppy.

“What have you been doing?” I demanded.

“Playing in the backyard,” came the reply.

“No! No! What have you been doing in my house? There’s mud from front to back!” I cried.

Innocently both boys checked their boots. All four were huge clods of clay properly cemented to moldering fall leaves.

“It was Georgie,” maintained the ever-loyal Joel. “It was Joel,” countered Georgie, a little slower on the draw.

Obviously chagrined by a mother who would make so much over such a minor incident, Joel volunteered more information. “Georgie/just/wanted/a/glass/of/water.” Each word was pronounced in a separate, distinct tone, in a manner reserved for communication with the deaf, the infirm, or the half-witted.

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“Well,” I replied, also being deliberately distinct, “the next time Georgie wants a glass of water, tell him to/get/it/in/his/own/house.” And having the last word, I dismissed them.

Within minutes, aided by a wet rag and vacuum, I erased the telltale evidences. Glancing at the clock I discovered that two lovely hours remained before the older children arrived home from school. Grabbing my Bible, I crept past the baby’s door listening for the reassuring pattern of his breathing, then on to my very own place—a seat beneath the big window where I could see the sky, blue or gray. A little hurriedly I whispered, “Here I am again, Lord. It’s Karen. What have you to teach me today?”



**"HERE I AM AGAIN, LORD.
IT'S KAREN. WHAT HAVE
YOU TO TEACH ME TODAY?"**

Opening the Scripture, I continued my synoptic study of the Gospels (comparing each gospel writer’s version of the same story). Certain vibrant phrases stood out. “If, as my representatives, you give even a cup of cold water to a little child, you will surely be rewarded” (Matthew 10:42, TLB) and “Anyone who takes care of a little child like this is caring for me! . . . Your care for others is your measure of your greatness” (Luke 9:48, TLB).

Shame flooded me. *Georgie just wanted a glass of water.* I bowed my heart and prayed, “Father, forgive me for caring more for clean floors and tidy schedules than for two little boys.”

Suddenly I remembered a voice from the past—Linda’s, as she leaned across the high school lunch table. “Does your mother always sing around the house like that—like I heard her singing when we were talking on the phone yesterday?” When I answered that she did, Linda looked at me and with envy said, “You’re so lucky!”

The world is full of Georgies just wanting a drink of water and of Lindas wishing they had mothers who sang in the kitchen. Many of them are our children’s friends. We really have no choice—we who know the one who is the Living Water, this same one who creates new songs in our hearts—we have no choice but

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to open our homes and our lives to those who may leave their telltale marks.

HOSPITALITY BEGINS AT HOME

Why is it always easier to extend the courtesies of hospitality to those outside our immediate families? Husbands, relatives, children, or—strangely enough—their friends often receive short shrift of our kind attention. This point was brought forcibly home to me by my daughter, who cleverly exclaimed before a roomful of guests, “Mommy, why aren’t you this nice to us when people *aren’t* here?”

Hospitality like charity, in order to be true, has to begin at home. The Lord has humiliated me enough through the comments of my own children that I have been forced to examine my attitudes toward them. Did it count, all this gracious open-house business, if I acted like a hellion the hour before company arrived? Wasn’t there something hypocritical about receiving laurels for my church work if my own children’s friends were neglected? Wasn’t there a glaring inconsistency if I really treated my children differently when outsiders were around? Through the years I had come to an understanding of the use of hospitality as a gift of the Holy Spirit for ministry. But was I really ministering to my own?

A woman can’t be perfect in everything, can she? Yet telltale marks had been imprinted on my own heart by the timely reading of the Scriptures: *If you give even a cup of cold water to a little child . . . anyone who takes care of a little child is caring for God who sent me.*

MAKING FRIENDS WITH YOUR CHILDREN

“Let’s be friends,” said a certain three-year-old, intruding his pug nose and snuggling his body under the covers to interrupt my slumber. Opening my eyes to the morning sunlight flooding the bedroom, I thought regretfully of yesterday’s battles. Then, placing a kiss—half on hair and half on cheek—I whispered back, “Yes, let’s be.”

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His little plea reinforced the theme of a psychologist's article on child rearing, which I had recently read. "Be friends with your children," the expert had advised. "Treat them the same way you would your friends."

I began to ask myself, "How would I say that to a friend?" and found my attitudes of annoyance mellowing. How often I've harangued, "Hang up your coat. Pick up your toys. If I've told you once, I've told you a million times, etc., etc." To a friend I would probably suggest, "There are hooks in the hall. Would you like to hang your coat in there?"

Don't my children (and husband and parents and room-mates) deserve the same special consideration I show to a friend? When a friend walks through that door, my attitude is one of greeting, of welcome. Children, however, are often blasted with, "You didn't put the peanut butter away after lunch. Wipe your feet. Take your books off the dining room table." After taking time to temper my commands with kindness, after discovering ways to communicate as well as feel friendship, I was amazed at the speed with which I was obeyed. The sharp edge of commands began to ease into a sweetly nectared agreement.

Upon honestly examining my attitudes, how often I found myself relieved to be relieved of my children. Now, each of us deserves a certain measure of privacy, but there are some parents who seem to hate to be in the same house with their own children. Yet I love to be with my friends. True, friends aren't always underfoot making strident demands, but if I could learn to be a friend to my children, couldn't they in turn learn to be a friend to me?

I thought back to my own parents. I can't remember them not conveying total enjoyment of me. There were moments of discipline, but the general tone of our relationship was one of mutual enjoyment. I could recall comments like, "Find something quiet to do," but only because I had begun to



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say those things to my own children! The words out of the past I most readily heard were, "Please come along with us. We just want to have your company."

My "childness" was never used as an excuse to dismiss me from adult conversations. When asked about this, my mother usually replied, "You were never a child!" She was right, because she herself bestowed upon me the honor of companionship.

My husband and I worked hard to create this atmosphere of closeness in our own family. He established a special tradition of taking one child at a time to early breakfast alone. Great secrets were shared; marvelous private communications occurred at these outings. We tried to make the times we did spend as a family unit lovely—filled with laughter and games, wrestling and sharing, growing and becoming. The TV had to go for many reasons, but one of them was that it cut into the companionship of our family times.

Friends talk with each other. They share intimately on private levels. It is easy for our communication with our children to degenerate to the degree of no more than, "Where are you going; what are you doing?" Efforts have to be made to extend our talks to, "What are you thinking; how do you feel about this?"

BEFRIENDING ADULT CHILDREN

As the children grew into young adults, a different kind of friendship system emerged between us all. We became collaborators in the process of creating our family life together. I am perhaps overly cautious about interfering too much in my adult children's lives; I am careful not to impose upon them my schemes, expectations, and desires. So we have entered into the Age of Negotiations. David and I basically say to them, "Hey! We've never been parents of adults before. You will have to tell us how you want us to behave. Do you want more distance, more involvement? What kind of family system should we be creating together?"

All of our separate autonomous lives need to be meshed. My children too have busy schedules, work and ministry demands, social involvements. I need to respect their independence, intelli-

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gence, and desires. In addition, new in-law spouses are being added to our family group. Each husband or wife brings an expectation of how families should function, drawn out of the concept of his or her own family system. Sometimes they are delighted with our patterns, sometimes surprised (perhaps even appalled!). But no matter the reaction, they must learn to relate to us as parents-in-law, they must learn to relate to the other adult siblings, and my own children must adapt to each other in these adult years. This, believe me, is a lot of work requiring communication and plenty of respectful negotiation.

Our plan is to gather every other Christmas and on alternate years at Thanksgiving. This respects the rights of other extended families on my married children's holiday involvement. We schedule a week-long family vacation with each other every other year and on the off year go to the Shakespeare Festival in Stratford, Ontario, for a few days of the theater. This seems to have attained everyone's agreement—at least for the present!

Communicating as friends with adult children means that I must allow them to work through some of the errors David and I unintentionally committed in our parenting. This is part of the way children work out their individuating from us; they need to decide what was good in the past and what was harmful. Then we work this out in a nondefensive series of ongoing conversations. David has been challenged on his workaholism; I have been critiqued on my too-low involvement in their worlds. This may seem a threatening procedure to some, but I personally believe it is healthy. Health in a family exists when we can talk about our areas of dysfunction and correct them. I much prefer that my children realize David and I were not and are not perfect, that they clear their emotional and psychological systems before they reach middle age, and consequently are free to do the work of maturation without unnecessary blocks to growth.

I want my children to always understand that there will be a place in our lives for them and for their children. There will be beds enough to come home to privacy if needed, to sanctuary if that is required. I have also learned through the years that this has

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as much to do with the emotional safety of “at homeness” as it has to do with the physical preparation of food and rooms.

FEELING AT HOME WITH PEOPLE OF ALL AGES

In fourth grade, Melissa brought home a notebook in which she and her teacher had written correspondence over the period of several months. I imagine he had established this with his class in order to encourage not only writing skills but communication. Some of the comments are hilarious, others poignant. An interesting item was written on Tuesday, March 2.

Melissa: *I think adults would be the best. I think it would be the best because we have company a lot. We also have to go to our aunt's house a lot. That's why I say adults would be the best.*

Teacher: *Why?*

Melissa: *I said because we have lots of adults over. And also that we go to our parents friends house a lot. It says it right up there. We go to my mom's mom's house too.*

Needless to say, I was left with a warm feeling after reading this. For those of us who have lived through the generation whose rallying cry was once, “Don't trust anyone over 30,” it is good to feel that Melissa truly did think adults were the best. Her relationships with older people had been satisfactory; she was not afraid of the time to come or of those who people that region of life. Her trust was intact.

Maturity has often been defined as feeling at home with people of all ages. What better preparation for growing up could we possibly give our children than that comfortable acceptance of people who are older? This is one of the reasons we particularly cherished the adults who were our children's friends—they assisted, through light camaraderie or special-interest projects, in the process of maturation.

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A LOVING WITNESS TO CHILDREN'S FRIENDS

At one point the Lord convicted me that my largest lack in hospitality was toward my own children's friends. Telltale marks indeed—it was hard to open my cleaned rooms to toy-oriented hands and feet. My own knew they were expected to pick up after themselves, but this standard was a little harder to impose on the neighbors' kids.

Coming downstairs one day, arms loaded with laundry, I nudged my way around two little forms huddled in conference on the treads. *Why do children love stairs so much?* Excusing myself, we shifted positions a bit, and I balanced my load on its way to the washing machine in the kitchen. I had not gone too far when I heard a little voice say, "I love to come to your house. Your mother doesn't shout all the time like my mother does."

It gave me pause, and I suddenly realized this little girl had been around frequently. I didn't know her mother, so I hadn't any way to judge the comment about yelling, but I did sense she had found shelter, a quiet space in a noisy world. *You are welcome, child, to my stairway any time.*

A second incident occurred during a premarital counseling session. The bridegroom-to-be was an excellent artist with heightened sensitivity, but while investigating his family background we realized there seemed to be nothing that would have opened the perceptions of a young child to the beauties of the world around him. In more than one way, he was a miracle of God's grace.

Intrigued, we prodded more into the past, searching for those relationships that might have unfolded his potential and nurtured his rare talent—an art teacher? a distant relative?

He smiled, remembering something good. "I had a girlfriend," he explained. "And her mother belonged to a Great Books discussion



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group. She would talk about ideas, literature, things never mentioned in my own home. It was the first time I knew anyone who was interested in what I thought, who expected me to have opinions and ideas. After a while, I think I just dated the girl to be in her home.”

Thinking back to the teens of my own high school, I wondered how many of them could have been stimulated by the shelter of my home. The dinner-table talk was lively—we didn’t think it was any good unless someone disagreed. There was music, lots of laughter, security. I can recall the sense of urgency with which I hurried home after school. The most exciting and interesting things happened in my own home: there were phone messages or the accounts of my parents’ activities, and I was always eager to resume my place near the center of them. If only somehow I could have shared this wealth with the teens whose heels dragged reluctantly homeward. One of the few regrets I have about growing up was that both my parents were too busy (each had a demanding professional position) to help me extend the circumference of our circle of warmth toward my non-church friends.

Though I continually absorbed stirring challenges to witness, I was nevertheless woefully inadequate and frequently doctored myself with lethal doses of guilt. Witness, to me in those days, consisted of refraining from an endless list of evils, carrying my Bible daily on top of my schoolbooks, grabbing honors in order to be respected, and cramming verbal testimony into conversations whenever the opportunity permitted. I knew nothing of heartfelt empathy, of sensing despair and loneliness in the lives of my classmates, of giving to them the ministry of Christ and thereby paving the way for valid witness. My own faith was barely a hard nub of a bud near opening.

How often do we as adults expect our children to do in their world what we fail to do in our own? I wonder now how many unloved teens there were in the corridors of that school, how many with the souls of artists who would have flourished in the environments of Christian homes.

Help me, Lord, to remember what little attention it takes to open

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the eyes of youth to the glories of the world and to the kingdom that exists.

HOSPITABLE PARENTING PAYOFFS

As my children entered the teen years I, like many mothers, was tempted to draw them behind the protection of our several walls, to raise my banner of isolationism against this crass society. Yet my head knew it was sin to close the doors of this fortress with ourselves safely inside.

The decision not to fortress our children from the dangers of the outside adolescent social environment has reaped many benefits in their lives. All of the four seem to be at ease in the company of non-church people—a precondition, it seems to me, for significant Christian witness. They attended, for the most part, state universities and colleges and successfully integrated their spiritual realities into campus life, classroom dialogues, and interpersonal relationships. Joel was a film student at a secular school that was overtly hostile toward religion. He figured this was as good a place as any to begin creating film and video works that contained moral and ethical values. Taking what I felt were great risks, he used in his projects storylines that often contained clear Christian statements. He graduated with a high grade-point average, many times receiving A's for projects that were decidedly divergent from the work of his amoral student peers.

David and I made a decision to assist our children in integrating their faith into the secular culture rather than isolating them from that culture. We watched over the years as the hospitality we modeled in our home became a hospitality they offered to their own friends. One of the prime examples was demonstrated to us by our youngest son, Jeremy. The summer after he graduated from high school, Jeremy was led to begin a Bible study with friends who were a year behind him in high school. Weekly, these six young men, none of whom were from evangelical churches and some of whom were unchurched, met on Sunday afternoons to learn to pray for one another, sing worship songs, and study the Scripture. Instead of going away to school as he had planned,

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Jeremy felt strongly that he should enroll in the local junior college so that he could continue with “The De-Dried Bones,” as their group was called, through the next year. In time, all six friends made faith commitments. One young man led his parents to the Lord; some led girlfriends to Christianity; the editor of the school newspaper wrote about the importance of religion in his life; some began attending our church. This group became part of a widespread spiritual emphasis in the lives of many high schoolers in our town.

The quality in Jeremy’s life that reassured me as his parent was his ability to have friends; he didn’t need to divide his peers into the spiritual haves or have-nots. He simply lived a Christian life out in his world of the public high school to such an extent that six American teens could respond positively to his invitation to commit themselves to a weekly Bible study through which, eventually, all their lives were changed.



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When children live in a hospitable home, they begin to share the telltale marks. Not only do they learn the tools of hospitality—clearing tables, filling water glasses, greeting people at the door, taking coats, finding toys for younger guests—they become familiar with the spirit as well.

Conversation, for example, becomes a natural art. How many times in the middle of some earlier year’s discourse did I feel a little body snuggle into my chair? Subdued was the mouth, but open were the ears. Like my mother, I don’t believe in excluding children on the general principle that they are children. I remember with great fondness the tales woven on the looms of my ancestors’ past; the amazing recognition that my father could talk to anyone about anything; the joy I felt when adults laughed together. If the evening was flowing and the children’s behavior suitable, they were welcome to listen and to learn to participate.

Naturally, there were times when, because of the intimacy of

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the subject, or because of the late hour, the children were excused. Often they had other pursuits that were more intriguing. Yet it was not unusual to have a child's arm dangling over the back of my ladder chair, a small head pressing cheek to cheek, a hand squeezing out the nonverbal plea, "It's all right if we stay, isn't it?" What better way for children to learn to converse than by observing this lively art?

One evening after the late-night company had departed, we climbed the stairs to make our regular bed check. All four beds were empty—even the toddler's! Conducting a household body hunt, we finally located the four soundly asleep beneath the large round table in the living room, hidden by its long cloth. They had crept downstairs and, unseen by any of the guests, crawled behind the benches and curtains to this covert, each trailing a pillow along! There, lulled by laughter and muted tones, they drifted into dreams, still feeling they were a part of the comfort of our circle.



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Still deeper effects have been worked in their lives by our hospitality to people in need. I have often been asked how our children have been influenced by the fact that David and I did so much counseling in our home with people in distress, and that we even invited some to live with us for a while. My answer is that the influences seem to be only positive.

It was nothing to grab a child as he scooted through the hall and send him off for a box of tissues for someone's tears. They learned not to be afraid of people's problems, but came to realize that human suffering is a part of living. They seemed not to be surprised upon encountering it. In fact, I think they are better for knowing we can help one another in the midst of the tears.

We were continually complimented (and this is one of the rich payoffs of parenting—other people's evaluations) on the children's maturity. I'm sure much of this is due to their being comfortable with adults, but I think some of it must be attributed to the

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fact that they became sensitized to others' suffering. Teachers often commented that one of the children had a heightened sense of justice, an awareness of what is right, which was coupled with a compassion displayed in the classroom or on the playground. Our children are richer for living in an open house. We trust it has prepared them to face their own griefs and to share in the pains of the world around them.

I can remember the time my back door opened and a grubby boot threatened to descend in ruinous contact with my kitchen floor. (Why the former tenant of the house, who filled the place with eight sons, would choose white tile for her decorating scheme was beyond me. All I can conclude is that she must have been a wonder in courage!) Impatience welled, but an inward voice spoke first. *Be careful what you say. Look into those eyes. Don't you see that Christ has come into your kitchen—"Anyone who takes care of a little child is caring for God who sent me"?*



**A DIFFICULT DISCIPLINE?
YES, BUT IT IS A WORTHY
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The foot came down on the floor, and I knew at that moment this was going to be a hard discipline, this seeing Christ in those of my immediate family, in those who would leave their marks over my floors and plans and life. A difficult discipline? Yes, but it is a worthy one. If I give to them but a cup of water, Christ counts it as unto himself. I am not only called to minister to my church or to my world, but I am privileged to serve those with whom I live. This concept has elevated my role of mother and wife and housemate to one of extreme satisfaction, but it has also made me greatly aware of the daily presence of Christ who, after all, leaves some telltale marks of his own in our souls.

*Christ be with me, Christ within me,
Christ behind me, Christ before me,
Christ beside me, Christ to win me,
Christ to comfort and restore me,*

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*Christ beneath me, Christ above me,
Christ in quiet, Christ in danger,
Christ in hearts of all that love me,
Christ in mouth of friend and stranger.*

—ST. PATRICK OF IRELAND



OPENING THE DOOR

1. *Look closely at the way you treat the children in your life.* Answer any questions that apply:

- *Your own children.* Which telltale marks are most annoying? How do you handle them?
- *Your children's friends.* What marks do they leave on you and your household? Do you know their names? Have you taken time to talk with them? What about that certain abrasive personality?
- *Your friends' children.* Have you ever thought, "If you were my child, you would never get away with . . ."? How would Christ treat this child? What specific action can you take to show his gentle, firm hospitality?

2. *Get on your knees.* Yes, the children in your church should have reason to look up to you, but coming down to their level will help them do so! Give children a chance to look eye to eye with you while you ask them questions that show your interest in their lives. Hospitality means being more concerned with their comfort than with the way you present yourself. So go ahead and play on the floor with them for a few minutes between Christian education classes and your worship service. And don't forget that other "on your knees exercise": Pray for them, that they will grow in their

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OPENING THE DOOR (CONT.)

faith and that their childlike simplicity will rub off on you in your own spiritual journey. Pray, too, that you will be able to see the needs that lie behind their telltale marks.

3. *Apply for an afternoon adoption.* Singles and couples who don't have children of their own should understand that, while it is sometimes relieving to be relieved of the children, kids also bring great energy and joy to life! Try "borrowing" a friend's child for part of a day—spend an afternoon in the park or traipse out to some goofy children's movie. Your pleasure in those few hours of light-hearted company will only be outmeasured by the child's delight in being considered your special friend.