

PARENTING *with* HEART



How Imperfect Parents
Can Raise Resilient,
Loving, and Wise-Hearted Kids

Stephen James
and Chip Dodd


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To our children in hope

Contents

Acknowledgments	13
Introduction	15

Part 1: INSIDE (Me with Me)

1. Giraffes on Ice	33
2. Wired for Relationship	49
3. Living with Unfinished Business	75
4. This Is Going to Hurt	93
5. Failure Is Not Optional—It’s Inevitable	109

Part 2: OUT (Me with You)

6. Put On Your Own Mask First	129
7. Climb the Mountain of Their Dreams	153
8. Hold the Flag Brave and True	167
9. Learn to Live the Questions	189
10. The Ultra-Triathlon	207

Notes	217
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Introduction

Rarely do parents not want what's best for their children. We go out of our way to do right by them. We provide. We pray. We worry. We hope. We dream. We lose sleep. We spend hours of our lives driving from school to practice to friends' houses. We invest deep emotional energy worrying about their futures. We make solemn oaths to do even better than our own parents did. And parenting never ends.

Once we become a parent, we have accepted the ultimate full-time job. There are no vacations. No paid time off for putting in extra hours. Life keeps happening. Being a parent is not something we can ever stop being. Our call every day is to continue to show up in our own lives and in the lives of our children.

This does not mean we don't need breaks from the responsibilities of our daily lives for replenishment, because we do. And because parenting is such a long-term proposition, we need to pace ourselves and take a long-term view. If we as parents have a mind-set focused on the long haul, we are more available to engage our children with wisdom.

We need to approach parenting like we are trying to raise really wise fifty-year-olds, which means that we accept that when our children are younger, they aren't yet good at living life with skill and wisdom. How could they be? They are inexperienced. They're children. Parenting with an eye on the future is a very different approach than trying to manage eight-year-olds.

So much of who our children will become at fifty is shaped by their life experiences more than by how we teach them to behave. If they are to grow into people of integrity, compassion, courage, and wisdom, then they need help in knowing how to keep heart. They need our help as parents to keep their hearts open to life and God. If we do that, they will very likely be capable of extraordinary love as fifty-year-olds.

When Michael and Samantha (not their real names) found themselves in my (Stephen's) office for marriage counseling, they'd been married for twelve years and had three children under nine. They were bright and earnest and obviously cared for each other and shared a deep love for their children, but they were anxious and unsure of each other as parents. Their genuine care and concern for their children was evident—as was the growing conflict in their marriage surrounding parenting issues. Samantha wanted to make sure her children were okay, while Michael wanted to be sure his wife was okay, but in reality, nobody felt okay.

Like many couples, they had entered counseling in hopes of learning to “communicate more effectively” and “get things figured out.” What they soon came to realize was that communication and figuring things out weren't really the issue. To be honest, Michael and Samantha were missing more than they knew. They lacked:

- a viable vision for their family
- a clear understanding of their stories
- a durable worldview that could carry their family the entirety of their lives
- practice engaging each other's hearts in meaningful ways

They were holding tight to their dreams of what they wanted their family to be but were quickly realizing that their life together as parents wasn't what they had hoped it would be.

Samantha remarked, "I thought that if I got married, I wouldn't be so lonely. Our relationship used to be so happy, and I thought having kids would just add to that. But I never knew it would be this hard. I love Michael and the kids so much. I can't understand why it's so difficult."

Michael and Samantha had each grown up in what they called good families, but neither could truly appreciate how ill prepared they were for the emotional challenges of life. They were largely out of touch with their own hearts, and they didn't know how to show up for themselves or for each other in any real, living, tangible way.

Over the next several weeks, Michael and Samantha made a lot of progress. As they explored their stories, they began to see how they had spent years trying to control each other's feelings and needs—something they had learned well in their families growing up. They realized how this actually kept them from being themselves, and how it left Samantha riddled with anxiety and Michael resigned in self-doubt. Their commitment to having a *happy* family was ironically

the thing keeping them from the deeper connection and emotional freedom they truly desired.

“How do I avoid doing this to our kids?” Samantha asked.

“How can we change this for them?” Michael wondered aloud.

As parents ourselves, we understand all too well this craving for happiness. It’s an idea that is often expressed by our clients who have little humans in their care. We also understand the deep desire not to mess up our kids. These desires and cravings express our love for them. The bad news is that by trying so hard to avoid the cycles of the past and not face the struggles of the present, we are almost guaranteed to repeat them. As professional counselors, we encounter individuals and couples like Michael and Samantha all the time—people who love each other and their children deeply but who discover that their resistance to life’s heartache and the attempts to control life’s realities and inevitabilities tend to create more problems than they avoid.

When we parent from a posture of anxiety, control, avoidance, or shame rather than from a posture of passion, vision, presence, and surrender to God, we inadvertently create more confusion and pain. We end up unintentionally and unknowingly harming our children—the exact opposite of what we hope to do. Only through an outgrowth of our own emotional and spiritual presence do we have what our children really need.

Our natural tendency is to want to be successful parents. The problem with this is that we ultimately measure ourselves by comparison (social media) and accomplishments (degrees). We have to get off the ladder. Not until we begin

living fully, from the inside out, can we be present to each other and our children.

We will never have everything we or our children want. We must come to a place of accepting that we do not have the power to give each other or our children everything we wish or dream, nor do we have the ability to be perfect. As we awaken to the reality of our imperfections and accept them (and even celebrate them), we learn instead to parent from the heart.

Parenting from the Heart

As children grow and develop, parenting becomes even more complex. We want our kids to flourish physically, intellectually, psychologically, emotionally, and spiritually. We hope to nurture passion, a capacity for intimacy, and the character of integrity so that they become capable grown-ups who contribute to the world around them.

Though our goals as parents may be similar, the means we use to attain those goals run the gamut. All the conversations about best parenting in our contemporary age center on this question: What is a more authentic, helpful, and sustainable way to parent our children? Over the past decades, we have seen a cultural shift from a parent-centric household, in which children were raised to be obedient without protest of any kind (i.e., seen and not heard), to a more child-centric household, in which children's self-esteem is valued as the key to a happy adulthood (i.e., everyone gets a trophy).

What we propose is another way to parent that is neither parent-centric nor child-centric but heart-centric. In this approach, all members of the family relate to one another

by using the voices of their hearts. Everyone in the family has equal worth but not equal authority. There is a lot of tension inherent in this idea. This approach requires more grace, commitment, and patience, but we believe the effort is worth it. As we parent our children from the heart, we find the space and the freedom to accept ourselves as parents who may not be perfect but who are good enough. And “good enough” is what we propose is the most excellent way.

Clumsy Is as Good as It Gets

A metaphor we like to use to describe this approach to parenting is that of giraffes running on ice. Giraffes on ice are out of their element; they’re equipped for the savannas, not the subarctic. Giraffes on ice, with their tangled legs, spun-out bodies, and frantic faces, reflect back to us how we feel on a daily basis as we raise our children—an apt metaphor for guaranteed imperfection.

All of us are works in progress, and being a clumsy parent is as good as we will ever become. Sometimes we crash on the ice in a massive tangle, and sometimes we glide along, believing we will never fall again. We are powerless over being human. We are powerless over being imperfect. We are powerless over being deficient. As beautiful, mysterious, and magnificent as we are created to be, we are also created with astounding limitations, one of which is our inability to have mastery over life.

This sense of imperfection and powerlessness is key to becoming capable of loving a child in all their own humanity. We display this act of courage when we step onto the ice and

embrace the beauty of living, loving, and leading truthfully, no matter how difficult.

How do we get to a place of accepting our powerlessness and imperfection while still pursuing all that is good, true, noble, lovely, just, admirable, and praiseworthy? There is no magic pill, no miracle cure, no checklist, no performance plan to arrive at this place of acceptance—only a path to walk and a life to live. This process of learning to live fully helps us to be good at being a person, which allows us to be the parent our children need. This is what we hope to offer in these pages.

This is not your typical parenting book. We won't describe what kids need at different developmental stages of their young lives. And we will not burden you with more to-do lists and scripts to perform (though we do offer some very practical and useful questions for you to ask yourself and real-life examples for you to consider). There are many resources to help you learn how to nurture your children at each of the formative stages. And there are shelves of books at libraries and bookstores to help you practically implement those plans with your kids. But without heart, all the knowledge and tools in the world won't give your children what they are made to receive. Rather than duplicate those efforts, we have laid out a path that will lead you—your true self—and your children through every phase of life. This wisdom will complement those other parenting resources and will make their teachings and techniques more effective.

It's hard in our compassion- and performance-driven culture to believe in our inherent imperfection when our social media profiles portray a seemingly glowing family life. (Who wants to post the pre-dinner temper tantrum—the

one thrown by the parent?) Real life is what's happening behind closed doors in between the rosy posts on social media.

We invite you to a way of living in which you realize you cannot attain perfection no matter how hard you try. If you are ready to embrace the fact that no matter how loving and well-intentioned you may be, you will fall short of anticipating and meeting all your children's needs, this book is for you. If you can humbly accept the reality that you will wound your children, whether you intend to or not, this book is for you.

Our passion is to lead people back to their hearts so they can live more fully. This same gift was once given to us, and it's the heart behind this book. This book is about your heart as a parent. If your children don't have your heart, they will have to raise themselves based on your rules instead of relationship. Loosening your grip on the lists and the formulas may be unnerving, but our suggested approach is so much more promising. No matter your background, personal experiences, age, or children's ages, you can apply this heart-centric process to your life. Even if your kids are grown, it's not too late to grow as a parent or to be more involved in your children's hearts. We assure you it's never, ever too late.

This book is our appeal to parents to consider their relationship with their children as a lifelong relationship of love—one in which the ultimate fruits cannot be fully noticed for decades. We hope to lift parents out of the postures of anxiety and shame through which they so often relate with their children and ask them to consider a guiding question as a lantern to light the difficult and uncertain path they are on: What does it mean to parent a child toward being a full-hearted fifty-year-old?

Another Parenting Book?

In counseling sessions and during seminars we have taught, we have been asked repeatedly to write a parenting book from the perspective of the Spiritual Root System (SRS). Developed by Chip, the SRS is an integrative way of understanding ourselves holistically. Building off a metaphor in Jeremiah 17:5–10, the SRS synthesizes common themes of Christian theology, counseling psychology, neuroscience, philosophy, and the arts in order to help make sense of life’s relational complexity. Simply put, the five roots of the human heart are feelings, needs, desire, longings, and hope. By addressing our roots and from where they draw their nourishment, we begin to live free—not bound by the narratives of our pasts or our biological drives—and our lives become fruitful.

For years, we resisted this request. One of the questions we asked ourselves when we started thinking about writing this book was “Why does anybody need another parenting book when there are already hundreds out there—most of them really good ones?”

Something else we considered was whether parents would really read a parenting book that is about parents and not about children. Most parenting books are about children (as most people would expect) and not about the parents. After all, who wants a parenting book that is not about children and doesn’t offer solutions?

Most often parents turn to writers who claim they know what they’re doing. Authors often proffer a list of the right things to do. (And who wouldn’t love to have a list to follow?) Do these things and when you complete the list, you have a product called an adult. But in regard to the heart of

parenting and the heart of a child, there isn't a list we can follow—just principles to practice in daily living.

Understandably, we want some kind of game plan, checklist, or instruction manual to help us be what our children need, but there is no perfect parenting model that will guarantee success or warrant our children (or us) against heartache. If a parenting book guarantees an outcome for a child's heart, the author is lying. In the Old Testament book of Leviticus, the Israelites received a list for many facets of life: how to treat foreigners and neighbors, conduct business, harvest crops, and a few dozen other things. Nobody could adhere to the lists. Paul wrote in the New Testament letter of Romans a detailed list for how to love and be at peace. The people who received the letter couldn't adhere to the list. In fact, Paul said he gave them the list so that they would know they couldn't follow it and would wind up understanding their need for God's grace.

Raising full-hearted children is not an outcome as much as it is a by-product of being our God-given true selves as parents. We can't help but raise kids with heart if we are parents with heart. So many parenting approaches focus on the outcome (kids). Far too few focus on the experience of parenting. That is the fundamental problem in parenting. We can know a ton about what our kids need and how they develop and how to best respond to them, but if our hearts are not in the right place, all those actions are, as the apostle Paul said in a letter to encourage Christians in Corinth, "a resounding gong or a clanging symbol"—we are just making a lot of noise. Paul continued, if we have knowledge, insight, and faith but no love (i.e., heart), then we are nothing (1 Cor. 13:1–2).

Being a full-hearted person means being a person who lives life with enthusiasm, sincerity, humility, commitment, courage, willingness, acceptance, and a daily surrender to life on life's terms. Full-hearted people recognize that their ultimate purpose is relationship, and they work to develop intimacy with themselves, others, and God. They can attach deeply to others in relationship and are able to value and honor the inevitable losses in their lives. They are able to recognize when they have been relationally wounded and know where to seek healing. Full-hearted people are able to say, "I'm sorry," "I am wrong," "You are right," and "Will you forgive me?" They are capable of accepting their limitations and celebrating their gifts. They listen to their fear, trust it to help them prepare, learn from their mistakes, and ultimately risk in faith—even in their uncertainties. Full-hearted people live with passion.

Becoming a person like this and parenting from a posture like this demand great intentionality. Fundamentally, they require trusting that parenting is a process and a relationship, not a task that gets results—this is even how God parents us. Changing this paradigm is our biggest passion behind this book. We want as many people as possible to lean into this style of parenting and begin to parent with a full heart.

So when we committed to writing this book, we were sure that we would do so from a perspective that is both realistic and humane—realistic in that we address and acknowledge the tragedy of life and the faithfulness of God, humane in that we do not set false expectations for parents or make promises that cannot be realized or sustained. We wrote this book from a posture of compassion and honesty because little in this life is more complex and requires as much heart as parenting.

We have attempted to write a book that addresses parenting for parents, parents as people who are parenting rather than parents who are learning how to raise their children—because you can't raise a child unless you understand your own heart, your own story, and the feelings, needs, desire, longings, and hope that are the foundation of your emotional and spiritual life.

This book, then, is an invitation to understand your heart and how you are made (specifically within the context of parenting). We set forth the relational language and the tools that will carry you—your true self—and your children through every phase of life.

Inside Out Parenting

You will notice several themes woven throughout this book; ideas such as powerlessness, surrender, acceptance, story, suffering, hope, freedom, intimacy, and others will emerge time and time again. We have worked hard not to be redundant, but it's impossible to talk about one component of what it means to parent with heart without referencing something we have previously mentioned. The human heart is messy. There is no direct route to describe it.

We have provided, however, a structure that we hope is helpful. We have divided the book into two parts with five chapters in each section. The first half of the book focuses primarily on knowing your own heart, not just as a parent but also as a person. We talk about:

- how to forgo perfectionism in favor of being good enough

- ways you are designed to experience and use your feelings in relationship with yourself, others, and God
- facing and accepting all your own childhood experiences, the good and the not so good
- coming to terms with the inevitable pain and failures you are bound to face throughout your life, especially as a parent

In the second half of the book, we move from the inside outward—from the roots of the process to the fruits it produces. This movement isn't necessarily linear; our personal growth tends to move in oddly shaped concentric circles, moving closer to and sometimes farther away from our goals but always keeping in sight the common vision, which is to stay connected to our hearts and to those of our children. We encourage you to:

- care for yourself and your marriage so that you aren't trying to parent from a dry well
- listen to the sentence written on your children's hearts so that you can help them pursue their unique makeup
- nurture your children's ability to keep the voice of the heart alive and wise
- live in the mystery and tension of unanswerable questions so that your children are free to do the same
- keep a long-term perspective on how to raise well-loved children who become compassionate, fully engaged grown-ups

At the close of each chapter, we offer questions to consider and practical ways to practice this process in your everyday life.

Wise-Hearted Parents and Full-Hearted Kids

We are fellow parents stumbling, sliding, and sometimes gliding along the ice of parenting right alongside you. We have included plenty of stories of our own living to prove it.

We met in 1998 when Chip was developing the manuscript for *The Voice of the Heart*. We have since spent several decades guiding people through the process of reclaiming their hearts and living fully. Following that book's transformational impact on individuals, we have been planning for many years to bring this heart-centric approach to parents and families. Many people are now waking up to the crucial importance of being present with their families, developing healthy attachment patterns in their children, and living a life of vulnerability and authenticity without the toxic shame that makes us shut down our hearts.

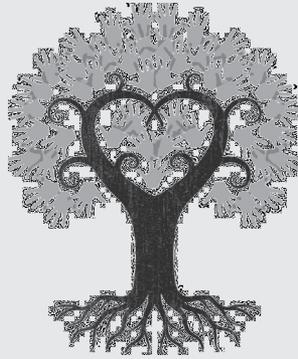
Participants in our seminars and clients in our counseling offices who learn to engage their hearts ask the same question Michael and Samantha asked: "What about our kids?" Our answer is this: your kids need you—fully human and fully alive. You are the gift you give your children—the real you.

We continue to practice this process as parents ourselves, and we invite you to join us on the ice as we struggle and fall down and get back up and move forward. Our hope is to help you surrender to this process, gain acceptance of yourself as an imperfect human being and a good-enough parent, and relish being fully yourself and fully alive in relationship with your children.

Your dreams will always be greater than your abilities, but you will be blessed by facing your limits and by continuing to

live in courageous hope. The gift of the effort is freedom—the freedom to persevere, to laugh at yourself, to be embarrassed, to experience regrets and forgiveness, to not take yourself so seriously, and to experience the profound and meaningful mystery of loving as you let go.

PART ONE



INSIDE

(Me with Me)

ONE

Giraffes on Ice

You're on Earth. There's no cure for that.

Samuel Beckett

A few years ago, I (Chip) was teaching a class at the Center for Professional Excellence, a treatment center for professional men who desire healing from addiction, depression, and anxiety struggles. Everyone in this group was highly intelligent, driven, and successful in their respective fields. They came from all walks of life. They were husbands, fathers, brothers, and sons. They were surgeons, pastors, dentists, and business leaders. These men had achieved much and given thousands of cumulative hours of service in their respective communities.

However, they also had something else in common: they were in the courageous and tentative first steps of recovery from addiction so they could have recovery of the rest of their lives. Like so many others, these men, before arriving

at the treatment program, had attempted to pull themselves, their work, their families, their friends, and their multiple responsibilities up a sand mountain using nothing but their intelligence, willpower, moral purpose, and ego. The higher they got, the more exhausted they became and the more damage they inflicted on everyone around them as they slid down the drifting sand. They came looking for help in restoring their lives—if possible.

On this particular day, we were talking about the sand mountain of perfection—the mountain made of achievements we thought we should be able to attain if we tried hard enough, were blessed enough, or were helped enough. What a trap this sand mountain is! No one reaches its summit of perfection, and yet we are trained to judge or assess ourselves against its heights.

As I spoke, I began to imagine giraffes attempting to maneuver on a frozen lake—their gangly bodies sliding on the ice, legs entangled, necks bent, as they grasped for stability and control but all the while simply fumbled, bumbled, and finally crumbled to the ice. Then they got up again and again until they could finally do what was very unnatural to this creature unsuited for such an environment. I shared with them this image and the best news I had to offer: “You have to face the reality that clumsy is as good as you will ever become.”

Nowhere is this idea truer than in the area of parenting. This may sound strange, but addiction recovery and parenting have a great deal in common. People in both groups need to leave the sand mountain of perfection behind and step onto the ice clumsily and yet courageously in order to live life on life’s terms.

Just as a physician practices medicine, parents practice parenting. Just as an addict in recovery takes it one day at a time, parents have to lean into the mystery of not being in control of life. The best anyone ever becomes is good at practice. Being clumsy does not stop our desire for excellence, and yet it speaks to the conflict in which we live: life will never live up to what our hearts can picture. A willingness to embrace our limitations and experience our lack of control is essential if we want to live well ourselves and be in authentic relationship with a child—of any age.

Acknowledging we will be clumsy is the secret to parenting full-heartedly. We want our children's lives to turn out well and for them to be more successful than we have been. We want our kids to be happy, but they won't always be (no matter how great a parent we are). The reality is that children can never be more than their parents, nor can parents be more than their children. We all will always be human.

The great irony is this: the more we expect or demand to control the outcomes, the more out of control life becomes. We can push against this lack of control, but the realities of daily life push back against us. Believing we are in control of as much as we pretend to be is a kind of craziness—and it's considered normal because it's so common. True normal is powerlessness. True normal is not going to change; we must change by leaving the sand mountain and finding freedom on the frozen lake. However, we can become better people, better mates, and better parents by being more adept at being human.

This idea of being a giraffe on ice is not new. You don't have to go far to find it. Donald Winnicott is less recognizable in modern times, but he had a revolutionary effect on

parenting. Winnicott was a renowned psychoanalyst and child psychiatrist whom many consider to have been one of the most important early psychoanalysts. He was twice president of the British Psycho-Analytic Society and the first child psychoanalyst in Britain who was medically trained. He authored numerous enduring books whose material often originated in hundreds of talks he gave on BBC Radio and in person to social workers, clergy, teachers, and others who worked with children and families.

Through his teachings and writings, Winnicott introduced the concept of the “good-enough mother,”¹ a more nurturing approach to parenthood that left room for inevitable failures to be viewed not as an unfortunate reality but as part of what helps children grow into resilient adults. In Winnicott’s view, the significant ills of society, from substance abuse to domestic violence to political extremism, were consequences of the failure to provide children with safe and supportive upbringings. The concept of being good enough wasn’t meant to condone parental mediocrity; on the contrary, it was considered essential for society to thrive.

The “not-good-enough parent,” by contrast, is one who needs the child to take care of him or her rather than the other way around. A child who is either ignored or forced to become the emotional caretaker will develop into an unhealthy person, one without a sense of being real and alive. The good-enough parent fosters a well-adjusted, creative, emotional sense of self in the child, who then feels more or less secure in the world. It’s rare that any parent starts here. This idea of being good enough is something we come to only by recognizing and admitting our mistakes as parents.

I (Chip) didn't always know this. In my first steps into parenting, I wanted perfection, to prevent having to face the pain of mistakes and the pain those mistakes would cost my child. In 1988, my wife, Sonya, and I were about to have our first child. We were lying in bed, and I was thinking about the upcoming birth, which made me reflect on my own childhood. As I pictured what raising a son would be like, I became afraid.

"I want girls," I said.

"What are you talking about?" Sonya asked.

"Well, I don't want boys because boys will quickly know all I can't do."

She asked me again what I was talking about. I was imagining a game of catch in the backyard—a warm spring day, trees lining the fence, a picture-perfect day. All of a sudden my future son throws the baseball to me, but I don't get my glove in the right place and I drop it. And my son thinks something like, "My dad is so pathetic." My son is going to expect me to do everything well, know answers, fix problems, never be defeated, be heroic, and keep him from all harm in life. I will fail, and then what?

I told Sonya about how I would fail my son's expectations, and I would lose his respect and love. "You know," I said, "the American father and his son. *Field of Dreams*. That sort of thing."

Sonya was teaching third grade at that time, and she said, "Chip, I see dads come into my classroom who, frankly, some would think are unfit as human beings, not just as parents. Yet the kids look up and say, 'Dad!' and run to these men. You don't understand," she said. "There's no way your child cannot love you. Your child can't help but love you. So it's okay."

What she said made so much sense. I wanted to believe her, but I was resistant. (Of course, how mistaken to think that raising either a boy or a girl would somehow be easier based on gender.)

So I began to come to terms with the idea that my child would love me. But did that mean I had given up on the idea of impressing my son with my best-dad-ever act, with my perfection? Of course not!

Five years later, my son, Tennyson, was on the four-to-five-year-olds soccer team, which he and his friends really enjoyed. The dad of one of his teammates used to play college football. We would stand together on the sidelines and watch our kids play. At six foot four, I'm a pretty big guy, but next to him, I looked like a walking stick.

After practice one evening, Tennyson and I were walking in the woods behind our house. I saw a log on the ground, and from my vantage point, I could tell it was probably dry, rotting, and light but very big. I picked it up and looked at Tennyson as if to say, "Watch this, son." Then I heaved that heavy-looking log back into the woods. Thinking my feat was pretty impressive and feeling like one of those guys who compete in a telephone pole tossing contest, I gave Tennyson a "follow me—I'm your guy" nod of the head.

Unimpressed, my five-year-old looked at me and said matter-of-factly, "My friend's dad is stronger than that."

Wait a minute! I wanted to say. *Don't you know how many games his team lost?* But Tennyson had looked around the world and had seen that this other dad was physically stronger than me, in spite of my clumsy attempt to impress him.

I thought, *Parenting is going to be tougher than I thought and harder than I hoped.*

I didn't realize at the time that I was always trying to climb the sand mountain of perfection. I didn't yet realize that no matter how hard I tried to scale it, I would always come sliding back down. The best I had to offer to my son was that same mountain. No one achieves its summit of perfection, and yet I was trained to judge and assess myself against its heights. I didn't yet know the reality: clumsy was as good as I was ever going to get.

Two Bad Options and a Way Through

But who wants to be clumsy? Who wants to look like a giraffe running on ice?

In order to relinquish our agenda of creating a life for our children that is beyond reality, we must face the two stances of parental perfectionism with which we all struggle: achievement focused and comfort focused.

If we are an achievement-focused parent, we subtly (and not so subtly) baptize our children in the notion that if we/they learn enough, do enough, make enough, then we/they can make our/their lives work. Our motives, overtly or covertly, contain the word *perfect*. In this approach, there is rarely room for mystery, ambiguity, mistakes, struggle, disappointment, or even true wonder. Even worse, it's a formulaic approach to parenting that says, "If I give my children the right ingredients, and they do their part, then their lives will be ideally happy (as I the parent define it and wish for it to be)." Our actual agenda, whether acknowledged or not, is to prevent the pain of life happening to us.

Achievement-focused parents spend a great deal of energy trying to be great parents and have their children be

great children. They are truly involved in training their children. They read books. They listen to podcasts. They go to seminars. They deeply love their kids, genuinely want what's best for them, and eagerly work and worry to make it so. Idealizing their children and their lives (or, might we say, idolizing them, because they really are the same thing) only sets up children for a powerful struggle with shame, inadequacy, and the compulsion to prove they are adequate or to give up. Because perfection is impossible, children will fail at completing the mission—the one their parents have set for them—and so they will fail their parents, fail their own mistaken expectations, and have a sense of failing others they love or need.

When we as parents need our children to achieve, we make our children idols. We shape and mold them into who we need them to be in a secret hope that they will make us okay. This achievement-focused perfectionism eventually diminishes a child's true self and shrouds the *imago dei* (i.e., how they are created as image bearers of God). No matter how good they look, what they accomplish, or how much they support our agenda, their hope that they will be accepted as they are created slowly ebbs away over time.

Often these achievement-focused parents become instructor/coach parents (hovering, watching, critiquing), challenging parents (demanding that the next obstacle of life becomes the next step of achievement for the child), or, even worse, a blend of the two: coaching-challenging parents.

The second model looks quite different on the surface but is very similar. This is comfort-focused perfectionism. Instead of being demanding of their children, comfort-focused parents demand perfection of the world around them. These

parents attempt to create a place and a space in which their children will not have to experience life on life's terms.

These parents may allow *some* pain to enter their children's world, but most of all they encourage their children's absolute freedom of expression, with no discernment of how free expression differs from honest feeling and caring for others. Their children are given free rein to act on every impulse in the name of "keeping their identity." They are vociferously defended from any genuine outside feedback about their behavior—all in the name of love and self-esteem.

These parents give their children over to a world in which the children are god. The world needs to change for them, and they have few to no boundaries that would allow them to feel and process their feelings in healthy ways as real life occurs. These children grow up to be adults who lack empathy and resiliency. They also lack respect for others around them. Eventually, as a result of their refusal to experience life on life's terms, they bury their true selves in a deep pool of demands that life not be painful and difficult.

This deep pool becomes a grave for their true selves because they equate pain with failure and disappointment with terror. They believe happiness comes only when life works the way they think it should. These children become demanding adults who eventually sink because such entitlement cannot create a world into which they can integrate successfully unless they have complete control. Like the children of achievement, they become very demanding of relationships that don't fit their system of control.

While these may be extreme pictures, can you recognize the tendencies of either system in yourself—either as a child or as a parent? In reality, most of us as parents swerve back

and forth between the polarities of these types of perfectionism. Most of us ping-pong between these two dysfunctional models, and we become trapped between two equally untenable places—between a rock and a deep pool of water. These dispositions have nothing to do with socioeconomic, educational, or ethnic backgrounds. They have everything to do with the human heart and our willingness to face and feel life on life’s terms.

This sounds heavy and ominous, doesn’t it? It is. These styles of parenting can be overt, but more frequently they are subtle—one small seed of parental insecurity and perfectionism planted at a time. If we dig down deep and give words to what is driving both types of parents, we might hear the heart say, “If I do this well, and I shape my children for success or safety or significance, then they will not hurt and will be happy and I can rest in knowing I did my best.”

If we went even deeper, we might hear the heart say, “I don’t really trust God to order the world of my children and care for them. I can do better than God. And even if I did trust God yesterday, today is a new day, and all kinds of mishaps and grief could befall them. Sunburn. Toothaches. Pimples. Heartbreak. Friend betrayal. Not to mention childhood illness, painful injuries, sexual abuse, or death. No thanks. I’ll write this story. I know better.” All of which is understandable. It is just not how life works. Children are not created for parents to find success by protecting themselves in the name of caring for their children.

The good news is that there is a third way, a way through, a more heart-centric approach in which we let ourselves and our children be good enough—a concept that embraces a more integrated, authentic, and engaged style of parenting.

This way leads us away from the demands of perfectionism for ourselves, our children, or our world.

Rather than seeking to be safe and in control, we become capable of living life on life's terms. Instead of striving for perfection, we find rest in the reality that we will be, for the rest of our days, a constant work in progress, perennially unfinished, perpetually imperfect—always becoming in the experience of daily living. When we begin to accept that clumsy is the best we get—like giraffes on ice—we can begin to offer what our children really need from us: heartfelt relationship. This encompasses empathy, sensitivity, grief and celebration, perseverance, authenticity, understanding, boundaries, and reduced demands while still having high expectations, gratitude for others, gratitude for gifts they have, acceptance of others and self, understandable anger and frustration about life, and hope as what holds it all together.

This sounds like a lot—and it is. These noble things cannot be achieved through knowing more but only through gaining and surrendering to the heart experience of living. The good-enough, clumsy parent is a wise-hearted person—someone who lives from a place rooted deeply in their authentic emotional and spiritual core and who has struggled truthfully to accept this clear edict: it takes a lifetime to learn how to live. Living the way we are made to live means acknowledging our feelings and asking for help and confessing that we are human. Living fully requires the ability to struggle daily with this truth: if we are going to experience the joy of life, we cannot escape the pain of love. If we don't stay sensitive to life, then we revert to perfectionism—insisting that life and our children and other people behave according to our preset agendas.

Powerlessness: An Essential Ingredient

The very thing that most parents spend their lives trying to avoid is their powerlessness over what might happen to their children. Parents want to overcome this powerlessness so that they can protect their kids from experiencing the pain they themselves have encountered in their own lives or know could be encountered. To live courageously, parents need a vibrant and real spirituality and deep, abiding relationships with other adults who share this vision for living fully and parenting from the heart. If parents aren't talking to other grown-ups they trust about this struggle with powerlessness and anxiety, then their love will be weak—even cheap. Their children will become responsible for making them happy, and that turns children into something they're not.

If we stay sensitive to life, we will experience powerlessness, which becomes a doorway to true spiritual and emotional growth. Admission of powerlessness is the key that unlocks the door into relationship with God, our friends, our spouses, ourselves, and our kids with room for mistakes and forgiveness. Our children need to know that we have the emotional capacity to be present with them during the greatest struggles and trials and the greatest celebrations. If we can stay in the struggle alongside our children and offer the assurance of our enduring presence, then they don't have to be anything other than human.

The primary function of parenting in the human drama is to help transform children into grown-ups, not to raise self-reflections of success or failure. Parenting is an emotional and spiritual calling that confronts us with our own

egos, idols, and systems we construct to foster a false sense of security and control.

When we do finally take the risk of letting go of the outcomes (due to awareness, despair, or accident), we can discover the freedom of genuine clumsiness and its rich gifts of living fully in relationship, loving deeply, and leading well. It's only in the unscripted, serendipitous, and spontaneous moments of life that we are genuinely ourselves and genuinely experience who God is. We sense that we are in the hands of love. We come to trust that God is doing for us what we will never be able to achieve for ourselves.

Before we can live well as clumsy parents, we have to courageously step into imperfection. Giving up perfection means grief. In the grief, we find acceptance of the struggle, and we hope again. Only then can we more honestly move toward giving our children authentic lives instead of the idealized versions of who we think they should be. This surrender doesn't mean we don't desire our own or our children's best. It means we give them our true selves and help them nurture theirs. When children intimately know the heart of their parent, they become free to become themselves.

The Ultimate Gift

My (Chip's) mother gave me a great gift regarding clumsiness, though I couldn't realize the far-reaching bigness of it at the time. I was in the third or fourth grade and said something very mean to her, such as "I hate you" or "I can't stand you." I remember knowing how wrong it was to say those things, and yet I also remember being so glad that she could take it. I think I was testing her love, her capacity to handle all of me.

Her ability to tolerate my words was amazing. I remember that my mother responded with something along these lines: “This is the first time I have ever been a parent. I don’t know how to do it all well. I need your cooperation and help too.” She was telling me we were in this together. In so many words, she was saying this was our first time through life. Everybody has to learn. And clumsy is as good as it gets.

Imperfect parenting is a gift to you and your children. Not only are your children well supported, nurtured, and loved, but they are also inevitably frustrated by your failures and must adjust to living in a flawed and fallen world. These children come to understand that life may be difficult and disappointing, but they are also more resilient in the face of setbacks and pain. They can continue to hope while living between inevitable grief and real celebration. They have seen their parents do it. They have seen their parents seek forgiveness for not doing it too, which is, paradoxically, a wonderful form of being good enough. Being good enough offers children the opportunity to become unique individuals who integrate fully into the realities of life.

Presence Replacing Perfection

This is what really matters as a parent: Are you present? Is your heart open to the pain and the joy? Are you vulnerable to the powerlessness of what life may bring? Can you admit to running from life? Or do you try to control life or ignore its depth? Like giraffes on ice, we are creatures living uncomfortable lives because we are created with a deep longing for peace, home, and security and a passionate desire for intimacy. Life is uncomfortable and sometimes devastating

and sometimes so full and rich that we want to freeze the moment forever. We must practice living life on life's terms because parents and kids alike will be broken by life. The most authentic gift we can give our children is the offering of our presence to ensure that they are not alone in their pain.

There is no such place as “away” from our kids or the pain in our lives. There is no place where we can escape the agony and still be alive to love and feel joy. Love is most present in hard times. Though the cost is great, our only solace and recourse is to love deeply, and loving deeply demands full presence, no matter what.

GOING DEEPER

- In what ways are you striving for perfection as a parent?
- In what ways do you keep a distance from your child's struggle with life so as not to face your own? If you are a parent to more than one child, think specifically in terms of each child.
- What do you do when you feel like you have failed?
- What does it feel like to know that all you can be is good enough?