

A STRANGER IN JOSEPH'S HOUSE



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The holy mystery of parenting another's child.

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My daughter's father's name is Carter. Until recently, I didn't know his name because I didn't know the man. I only knew that he existed.

Often when we sat at supper, I would look across the table at Talitha and seek in her features the faces of her begetters. They seemed always to hover ghostly behind her, their features indistinct,

blurred versions of her own. Her father, I knew, was African American, her mother white. And because Talitha, who has been our daughter since the eighth month of her life, was growing older among us, so were the presences of these two anonymous souls.

But they were the blank part, the root of this child still deep in soil. Talitha's birth parents had

made her in their image, and I sought those images in her: a slant, receding jaw, softly curling hair, high cheeks, an aggressive character. Would I recognize either one if I met them on the street? How much is our daughter ours, after all, and how much theirs?

The man and the woman were ghosts in the family, not because they were not, but because they were not known.

Now Joseph was a righteous man. He obeyed the word of God, whether written in the laws of Moses or uttered in dreams by angels. He obeyed, and obedience made a marriage where there might have been divorce. Obedience saved his son from Herod's hatred. Joseph's obedience took him to Egypt and then again to the security of Nazareth, where it shaped the daily life of his family by offerings and sacrifices and the keeping of feasts.

The more I think of this man in whom meekness was a strength, the more I honor him. Unlike Zechariah, he was not mute. Yet the Bible records no word spoken by Joseph. Most folks involved in the events of the Nativity talked. They sang and chattered and expostulated. Everyone: kings, priests, scribes, relatives, neighbors. Even the shepherds. But not Joseph. He didn't talk. He obeyed. Silently and steadfastly, he acted. He served.

Yet the man was no one's puppet. And his heart was kind. Joseph chose to temper righteousness with tenderness. Whether the law accused her or not, he would never put Mary to shame. Nor would he leave her behind when he, as head of the household, went to the City of David to be enrolled. And when in Bethlehem a babe was born which was not his own, in whose face he would never find his own image, Joseph kindly, righteously adopted it.

Joseph is the patron saint of the fathers of families. Perhaps he ought to stand model for all parents, because the ghostly unknown that hovered behind his adopted son—the Begetter of *this* boy, in whose features was the First Father's image—is also the Father of every child ever born in the world. And God's heavenly parenthood makes all mothers and fathers the adopters of their children.

But I feel a particular friendship for Joseph. Our fatherhoods are so similar that I cannot but learn from his plain response to the glorious task of raising the Son of Another: faith, obedience, tenderness, and finally release. The child was his but a little while. . . .

In May 1993, my wife, Thanne, and I were driving Talitha home from school. It's a long trip from Atlanta, Georgia, to northwest Indiana.

As we crossed the Ohio River, our daughter leaned forward from the back seat and said, "I want to stop in Freeville." "Really?" I said.

"Freeville" (not its real name) is a little town in central Indiana. According to her birth records, it's the place where Talitha was born. In 19 years we had never been there.

I said, "But why do you want to go there now?"

She had just finished her first year at Spelman, a historically black women's college, an excellent institution, free in the faith—and the answer to the earnest prayers of her mother and me.

Talitha's high-school years had been rebellious. She's a fighter, a swashbuckler: fearless, willful, and willing to fight for her rights as she perceives them. It's a marvelous, martial collection of characteristics; but lacking maturity it also lacked the wisdom to distinguish which rights were worth fighting for, which were whimsical, and which were plain selfish. Thus the drama and the trauma of her adolescence.

Actually, I've always stood in awe of a child who could schedule herself to the minute, sleeping, studying, playing according to her own clock. But that same independence was awful if one woke her too soon, like rousing a lioness in her lair.

We prayed that Talitha would be able to attend Spelman because of the learning and faith of this institution. We prayed, and God said, "Yes."

So it came to pass that as we drove through the southern portions of Indiana, I said, "Why do you want to stop in Freeville?"

And Talitha said, "I want to find my birth parents."

Thanne and I fell silent. I set my jaw and drove.

In that instant, matters were vastly reversed. I was the ghost, and my fatherhood was vanished. My daughter was peering through me, seeking the features of her begetters. And though I may have been a tool, a means to that end, theirs was the substance she desired. In *them*, now, she sought her identity and her self.

What should Thanne and I do? What word should we obey? Talitha's? The one that leaped immediately to my lips as I stared down Interstate 65? Some deeper murmurings of Almighty God?

Such a moment, I believe, also occurred for Joseph. Jesus never challenged his authority the way Talitha did ours. Luke says he "was obedient to" his parents. Yet, there were intimacies in which this adoptive father could not participate. For he likely would sit at a Passover meal and look into his son's face and find there absolutely no characteristic of his own.

Mary's eyes, perhaps; the curve of *her* jaw: he could see a mother-son relationship, but he could only watch. It was a parenthood beyond his reach.

Someone else dwelt in his son's face. Another source governed the boy's behavior. Indistinct, completely different, strange to this father, a ghost in the household.

Training up the child of one's own loins has a deep spiritual and genetic appropriateness. One doesn't question one's right and the instinctive rightness of one's methods. Communication is as deep as the chromosomes. Thanne and I have raised children born to us as well as children adopted, and we've experienced the difference. In order to train up the adopted child, one must also learn *her* language, since

communication begins at the surface of things. One must never assume a complete knowledge of this child except as watchfulness and love reveal her. And very early the adoptive parent realizes that the methods of training *this* child must obey a greater source than flesh and natural conception.

I am speaking for Joseph. He must have trained Jesus with a more conscious loving, a more patient searching of his son in order to learn the character of the stranger placed into his care. And I am convinced that Joseph founded his right to raise this child upon the word of God—the immediate message of the angels (Matt. 1:20–25) and the covenantal law, the righteousness required of all faithful fathers. Joseph sought the source of his authority in God, and he accomplished it by obedience and by faith.

In the regular day-to-day labor of raising children (all our children, those adopted in the flesh *and* those adopted in the spirit), Thanne and I have stood in the shadow of this common, quiet man.

But then comes the frightening moment, the vast reversal when present parenthood starts to vanish because the child is seeking his identity in Another.

Joseph and Mary and Jesus took a trip. The little family traveled from Nazareth to Jerusalem. All was well. They went to celebrate the Passover, and since Jesus was 12—an age of transitions not unlike the eighteenth year of our children today—this may have been his first experience of the feast. This was the year when the Law required his father to acquaint him with the duties and regulations that he would assume as a 13-year-old male.

So Joseph did what was required of him, faithfully enacting parenthood, and then they began to travel home again.

Suddenly, late in the journey, the parents realized that their child was absent. He was nowhere among the pilgrims, and because their love was genuine, they rushed back to Jerusalem in a panic.

When was it that Joseph suffered the prickly feeling that he was seeking a stranger? When did he admit that he didn't know his son well enough to guess where he would hang out in Jerusalem? They spent three days searching everywhere *except* in the temple. And when they found Jesus sitting there, they were "astonished" by his ability to amaze even the teachers: a stranger!

The boy's mother was upset. Mary took it personally: "Why have you done this to us?" she said. "Your father and I have been so worried looking for you!"

As Luke records it, the adoptive father was quiet. But then occurred the moment of reversals, when Joseph became the ghost past whom his son was peering to see his Real Father, in whose substance was his self.

"Why were you looking for me?" Jesus said. "Didn't you know that I must be in my Father's house?" (Luke 2:49).

Let no one ever diminish the depth and the complexity of Joseph's response. It is right now that faith and obedience and mercy and a parent's personal choosing all had their most significant effect!

Joseph obeyed. Whose word did he obey? No

word nor wound in his own heart. Neither pride nor self-pity controlled him, for he continued as before—never changing—to be the father of this boy, taking him home again to Nazareth.

Joseph "did not understand the saying" that Jesus had spoken to him. Intellectually, the plain man was ignorant. Yet he acted nevertheless, because obedience is always possible—even, and especially, without knowledge! Joseph acted by obeying the words God had already spoken to him. And though he did not directly submit to the saying of his son (which would have given a child the rule of his household), he did obey the deeper meaning behind the saying—for there it was that God dwelt.

Here, then, is the saint of parenthood and the model for Thanne and me: This father, not comprehending all that was going on around him, receiving the lesser respect of his own son—a this adoptive father chose mercifully still to *be* a father. By faith! In obedience. Already now he ceased to covet his child's first love and praise and honor. The quiet man was also a humble man. In fact, he could best fulfill his parental role precisely because he did not do it for his own benefit.

Thus a plain man accomplished a task of terrible glory, raising a child who was born in the image of God. Has any parent a different task?

Luke writes that Jesus was "obedient" to Joseph and Mary thereafter. In their household he "increased in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God" and with the neighbors (2:51–52).

By loving God, Joseph loved Jesus aright. And by following God, Joseph led his son out of the house, into adulthood and into the purpose for which he was born. A righteous father raised a righteous son, then released him finally to the righteousness of his greater ministry.

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We stopped in Freeville. We found the courthouse where birth records are kept, the Lutheran church Talitha's birth mother might have attended, the high school, and the hospital where our daughter had been born.

The town was altogether white. It seemed to us that the presence of a black man 19 years ago might have caused a stir. Perhaps it might be remembered.

And because Talitha's mother had kept her for eight months before giving the baby up for adoption, we believed that the birth had not been a secret. We also felt that those eight months must have made the infant dear to the young mother. These things caused Thanne and me to acknowledge the deep desire in our daughter and not to discourage it.

We chose Joseph's way: to parent in humility, allowing our child a self-discovery beyond ourselves, but continuing to parent her even during the search, and forever praying her heavenly Father's benevolence upon it.

Be born, Talitha. Be born a second time, this time into knowing and heritage and identity.

Obedying the Lord, who gives us children for a little while before they must enter their independent lives and purposes, we chose to help her seek her source. And this was our parenting: if it seemed that the venture might turn destructive,

we would be there to control it. But if we had refused to help her for whatever reason, we would have set the crack in our family that could finally have divided us.

That summer Talitha herself returned to Freeville and began to check records. She talked with folks: the secretary in the high school, administrators of the county, the hospital, newspaper. She is, as I said, fearless. "Do you remember a black man in town about 19 years ago? Did he have a baby by a woman here?"

She kept notes and discussed them especially with Thanne. They became detectives.

They discovered the family name of the woman who had borne her. And then her first name—Mary.

The ghost was growing more present. And I felt more ghostly. I wondered: the closer she came to *that* mother and father, would she move farther and farther from us?

But, in ignorance and humility, we obey. We seek the wholeness of our children as God conceived it from the beginning, the identities in their past, the purposes in their future. Clinging can kill these things.

Talitha and Thanne learned the name of her birth mother's father, our daughter's grandfather. He still lived in Freeville. He was the link.

Talitha wasn't home during the summer anymore. They decided that Thanne should tele-

phone him to see whether she could learn where his daughter lived.

This was one of the most difficult tasks my wife had to perform. She would not lie. On the other hand, if she misspoke, the man might hang up and the link would break.

It was in grave anxiety that Thanne dialed Freeville from our home in Valparaiso.

A man answered.

Thanne said, "My daughter knew your daughter years ago. But she's lost contact. Can you give me her phone number and address?"

There was some hesitation at the other end, but the man said, "Wait," and went to get the information.

Immediately Thanne called Talitha and read her the telephone number. Dallas, Texas. Such excitement: Talitha hung up to dial it herself, but she called us back within several minutes. The phone in Dallas had been disconnected.

Then it was, we believe, that God quietly intervened.

While Talitha was visiting friends for whom she had often babysat, she noticed a yearbook from the high school of her birth town.

"Did you go there?" she asked the man.

"Yes," he said.

"Did you know Mary W—?"

"Yes," he said.

"Do you know where she is now?"

"No," her friend said. "But that class just had a reunion. I know who has a list of all the graduates."

From Atlanta, Talitha telephoned us late one night, trembling with excitement.

"I have it!" she said. "I have Mary's telephone number. The right one!"

Thanne parented. She said, "Listen, Talitha: it's late, and you know how much you hate it when someone wakes you up.

"Wait till tomorrow morning, then try to call."

That night neither the adoptive mother nor the adoptive daughter slept. In Valparaiso and Atlanta, they shared the sweet, terrible moment that precedes a ghost's taking flesh.

By seven A.M. Talitha couldn't wait any longer. She dialed the number that rang in Dallas.

A woman answered. "Yes?"

Talitha had planned to ask two questions.

She said, "Is this Mary W—?"

The woman said, "Yes."

Talitha asked, "Did you have a baby girl on January 9, 1974?"

There was a pause. Then the voice said, "Yes. I did."

Talitha said, "I have reason to believe that I was the one you had."

Now there stretched a longer silence in Dallas.

Talitha said, "I can call you back later."

The woman said, "I always knew you would call. I just didn't think you'd call me at six o'clock in the morning!"

My daughter's father's name is Carter. He is very short and very dark. He lives in North Carolina. So does his mother, our daughter's grandmother, Trula.

After Talitha had visited them, Trula called Thanne. The elder woman was in tears.

"The baby called me Grandma!" she said to Thanne. "The baby called me Grandma!"

We've met Mary W—, Thanne and I. She is no longer a ghost.

She has precisely the same slant to her jaw, the same high cheeks, the same aggressive character. They laugh alike, they talk alike, they're shaped alike.

They are good friends, now. And Talitha has learned her own infant history, as well as the histories of her parents, her heritage.

We've met the Indiana side of Talitha's family, too.

Her grandfather told us that Thanne's telephone call felt different. Somehow he knew that the past was blowing nearer, and that his help would begin a reunion.

And Thanne and I are glad. We have begun to see in the face of our child the faces of all her parents: Mary and Carter and the Almighty, dear and loving Creator God.

The ghost in Jesus was holy. In him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell. This is what Joseph by his plain, faithful obedience was granted to see: Im-

manuel, God with us.

In all our children's faces is the image of their Creator. When any parents, by loving God, love their children right; and when, by following God, they lead their children out of the house, into adulthood and the purpose for which they were born, then in that fullness they, too, will find the face of God the Father, who had lent them the children in the first place.

Mothers and fathers, what glory there is in plain parenting and common obedience! For the God who's at the beginning of this task is there at the end of it, too, saying, "I always knew you'd call." ■

WHEN WAS IT THAT JOSEPH SUFFERED THE PRICKLY FEELING THAT HE WAS SEEKING A STRANGER?

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