

Donna Harris

When Michael asked me to speak about the experience of being a foster parent, I was very eager to tell our story. And then I thought, “Oh, my. Where do I even start?” Because our decision to foster was part of a larger process four years in the making. Should I tell of our attempts to get pregnant? Combined, we had a total of 15 failed tries. Should I speak of navigating the hopeful highs and devastating lows of infertility? Of giving hormone injections in a Carraba’s bathroom stall? Of my hysterectomy at age 33? Do I mention the high cost of private adoption, an option that is financially untenable for us because we spent all we had trying to become pregnant? That seems, to me, to be another talk unto itself, so I’ll leave it be. Besides, I’ve been up since 6 this morning, so I’m already hungry for coffee hour.

I suppose the best place to begin would be with a conversation I had with a friend in the spring of 2014. She and her husband had explored the possibility of adopting one of her students who was in foster care at that time. While they did not end up adopting this child, their experiences expanded my awareness of another route to parenthood: foster to adopt. Adopting through DSS is substantially less expensive than a private adoption, and the idea of giving a child a stable home they wouldn’t otherwise have was very appealing to me. I mentioned this to Nicole in passing, but we didn’t discuss this option to any great extent.

A little while later, I got a call from that same friend, letting me know that there was going to be a DSS summer class for prospective foster parents, with the goal of participants completing all trainings over the summer months. Obviously, this was appealing for us since we both work in the schools. I called Nicole to tell her about this, and she was open to attending the classes. Couldn’t hurt to get more information, could it? And after all, we weren’t going to be *foster* parents. We were just looking to adopt.

That summer, we attended classes and did corresponding workbook activities regularly. Some of the workbook questions elicited eye rolls from us (*What song describes how you’re feeling after completing this unit?*), but the process also facilitated some great conversations between Nicole and me. At the end of each workbook, we were also asked to rate how we were feeling about the fostering and adoption options. We rated ourselves on a scale from “I’m not interested in fostering or adopting” to “adoption only” to “I’m interested in both fostering and adopting.” Each time, our rating was the same. We were interested in adoption only. Fostering was not for us.

It wasn’t until we reached our final class that we both began to change where we rated our interests. While adoption was certainly a preferable option for us, we felt our hearts turning more openly toward the prospect of becoming foster parents. Because it is quite a process before a parent’s rights are terminated in North Carolina, the chance of getting to adopt a baby through the foster system was practically impossible. Therefore, if we wanted to know our child as early in life as possible, we would have to be open to fostering. While the risk of loss is deeply embedded in this type of parenting, we were shakily confident that this was the right move for us.

After several uneventful months spent cleaning out closets, assembling bunk beds, and sorting hand-me-down clothes from friends, we got a phone call on about two brothers, one 4 weeks old and the other 19 months. With less than a week to prepare, we wore ourselves out gathering supplies, doing some last-minute cleaning, and making the house safe for a toddler. **No outlet was left uncovered.** Then, after a 20-minute drop-off on June 8<sup>th</sup>, we became first-time parents to two children under the age of two. How's that for a trial by fire?

Having R and W in our lives and hearts has been the most profound experience of our lives. Through fostering, we are learning to hold- or at least attempt to hold- two opposing truths in our hearts. The first truth is that we love them beyond anything we can imagine and that they enrich our lives in ways we never dreamed. This truth is tempered by the realization that the boys already have parents and grandparents who also love them very much. If their parents are able to be reunified with them, which seems highly likely, then there is the joy of knowing that they loved the boys enough to do what they had to do to get them back, that they cared enough not to give up. However, that joy is overshadowed by the enormous grief we will feel when we are no longer able to tuck the boys into bed at night and the worry we will experience when we aren't there to protect them and see to their everyday needs.

When we first got the boys, Nicole and Father Michael were talking about the unique experience of fostering, about how it is equal parts deep joy and deep pain and that the two parts are inherently intertwined. We experience that duality on a daily basis. We smile when R reminds us to pray over our coffee at breakfast and then cry on the drive to work as we already begin to grieve a separation that is still months away. We pack diapers and bottles for their visits with their parents, but we are the ones who got to see W roll over for the first time. We have much to lose, but we are experiencing so many happy memories that can never be taken away. The pendulum is always swinging, but we strive to err on the side of joy because we do not want to grieve this joyful season away.

Now that we are right in the thick of mothering, I have been thinking often of Jesus' mother Mary.

Mary had to experience duality as a mother right from the get-go. Even on the joyful day when Mary and Joseph presented their infant son in the temple, Mary is told by Simeon, "This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed- and a sword will pierce your own soul, too." **A sword will pierce your own soul, too.** That line has been running over and over in my head lately. I can imagine Mary rocking her baby to sleep and staring at his face while wondering what challenges the future will hold for him. I don't doubt that she lay awake worrying about what pain he'd experience, knowing that the pain would be sharp enough to pierce her soul as well. As I lie in bed worrying about the boys' future and anticipating the sword that is pointed toward my soul, I look to Mary as a model of how to handle the balance between frightening uncertainty and the deep joy of parenthood.

While the Bible does little to document Jesus' childhood years or tell us what his day-to-day interactions with his mother were like, we are told that, as he grew, "his mother treasured all these things in her heart." **His mother treasured all these things in her heart.** That's the other sentence that keeps rising

to the surface for me, perhaps because I now understand the private wishes, thoughts, and emotions that come with motherhood.

So these days, I'm finding much to treasure. I treasure the way R shouts, "Daaaaaa!" and runs headlong towards me when I pick him up from childcare. I treasure how easily and heartily W laughs. I treasure how both boys have a unique ability to charm pretty much everyone they meet. I treasure watching Nicole read and sing with the boys. I treasure how R lifts his sippy cup and says "Cheers!" at dinner, the way he runs when he gets excited, and how he has added the word "Wow!" to my vocabulary. I cherish how the boys are growing in their brotherly relationship and how W seems to gain new skills almost daily.

Sure, some days grief still seeps right through the cracks and I feel that sword of loss bearing down on my soul. But I am learning to stop and remember where I am and where we are in this process **right now. Right now** I have to make lunch, fold laundry, wipe peanut butter off of, well, every surface imaginable, hold a little hand, blow bubbles, sing lullabies, call the doctor for the millionth time, change a diaper, wipe tears, feed the fish, read *Goodnight Moon*, play trucks and trains, push a stroller, wash dishes, warm up a bottle, plan a birthday party, make a bath, and just generally bask in the busy, chaotic, messy joy that is my life.

So if I seem a little tired or distracted these days, don't worry about me.

I'm just busy treasuring.