

An open pair of arms

By [Ryan Dueck](#)

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The headline grabbed me right off the bat: [Alberta couple blindsided after adopted girls turn out to have fetal alcohol disorder](#). The story was heartbreaking in the way that only stories about wounds inflicted from close proximity can be. A couple took on two foster kids but one of them quickly proved to be quite a bit more than they could handle. There were repeated assaults of her sister, there were angry words and abuse, there were doors locked from the outside and alarm systems set up, there were desperate calls to social services. There was the shrapnel of toxic rage flying around shredding everyone in the vicinity.

The story is a terrible one. But it was a few words in the headline that caught my eye. Words like *blindsided*, *adopted*, *turn out*, and *fetal alcohol disorder*. The parents were evidently not aware that the girls had FASD when they decided to foster them. And now their entire history with these girls (the elder one, in particular) was being read through the lens of this discovery. FASD was and is *the* cause of their heartbreak. If only they had known that they were getting damaged goods. They knew that the situation was not ideal, of course. It never is, in cases of children requiring foster care. But FASD is a game changer. If they had only known that there was this one critical factor. They would never have signed up for this, if they had only known.

I do not judge this couple. There are many lessons I have surely failed to properly learn in my 14 years as a parent, but the one that I *have* learned is that there are few easy roads on this journey. Every child is delightful and challenging in his/her own way, and every parent copes the best way they know how. Sometimes we fail spectacularly and the pain and misunderstanding just bleeds through all that our days contain. Sometimes, against all odds, we get it right—or at least right *enough*—and we all live to fight another day. It's so easy to cast stones at other kids, other parents—to sit in silent judgment over their inadequate methods, their laziness, their insolence, their disrespect and selfishness. But often we have *no* idea what's going on under the surface, behind closed doors, where skeletons lurk, where

the sadness and confusion just soak through everything.

But the way the article was framed made me uneasy. How many of us, after all, know what we're getting into when we sign up for this parenting thing? How many of us encounter things along the way that send us reeling and staggering, things we could *never* have imagined, could never have adequately prepared ourselves for? For how many of us do things unfold the way in which we mapped them out way back in the beginning when we held these precious tiny bodies in our arms? Some, perhaps. I suppose that idyllic situations must exist out there somewhere. I see them on Facebook, after all. But I'm guessing that the majority of us are forced—abruptly or more gradually—to come to the uncomfortable realization that kids are not like products we get off the shelf, where all we have to do is to provide the right inputs and—voilà!—at the other end we get a wonderful, well-adjusted adult human. Not exactly. To be a parent is to be blindsided.

I'm not suggesting that the parents in the story above were or are naïve or idealistic. Far from it. Their story makes my heart hurt. As I said, the *last* place I would position myself would be in judgment over them. Sometimes, tragically, the only conclusion that can be arrived it is encapsulated in the last paragraph of the article:

[We] still love them, and we want the best for them, but the one—she can't get the best here. We're not capable of giving her what she needs.

It's true. Sometimes we're just not capable of giving each other what we need, not capable of *doing* enough, *being* enough, *loving* enough. Christ have mercy.

I go through seasons in life where a single story from the gospels will just hover in the periphery of my consciousness for long stretches of time. Over the past year or so, it's been the story of the prodigal son from [Luke 15:11-32](#). Who knows, it might even be more than a year. Maybe even the better part of a lifetime. This story moves me in ways that I can often barely express. I have seen and continue to see myself in both sons and the father, and in various ways. *This* story tells *my* story in a way that few others can.

As Christians, I think we're often pretty anxious to get to the end of this story. That's where all the reconciling goodness comes, where the moralizing payoff is to be found. This is where we say, "You see, the wayward son recognized the error of his ways and so must we," or "You see how the father forgave so readily? So must we,"

or “You see, how legalistic that older brother was? We mustn’t be like that.” All these musts can get in the way of the deeper realities of the story, though. And our lives are lived in middles not just endings. Sometimes all the moralizing can be practically useless. Or worse.

So, about these middles where we live. I often find myself wishing for more when it comes to the middle part of the story of the prodigal son. I often wonder what it was about him that caused him to wander away to destroy himself. Did he have a genetic condition? Some kind of “oppositional defiant disorder”? Did his mom drink too much? Was his dad too demanding? Did he expect too much? Did he push the son away with endless haranguing? Was the younger son’s brain corrupted and rotten from too much TV and video games? We don’t know. But oh how we hunger for the magic bullet, the single cause to pin the pain to, the simple explanation to cut through all the thorny thickets of complexity.

Jesus doesn’t give us the middle part of the story. But he does invite us into a few very important realities about who we are and how we are to be in the world. Chief among them, I think, might be that **we are all damaged goods**. We are not all damaged in the same ways or to the same extent, to be sure. We each encounter unique strains and sorrows. Our individual stories are all the product of this impenetrable mixture of biology, social location, and long trails of relationships and the pressures that they exert upon us and upon those who gave us life. But we are all prodigals stumbling toward ruin and home.

And in light of all this? Well, increasingly I think that the most important conclusion that we human beings could ever come to is as simple as it is profound. **Mercy. And an open pair of arms**. Even when those arms have been wounded before. Even if opening them again might lead to further pain. Even when love proves to cost us more than we could ever have imagined. We keep opening them—or at least *trying* to open them—because we know how desperately we long for there to one day be an open pair of arms to welcome our damaged selves to our eternal home.

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