

NOTES:

FOSTERING HOPE

Experiencing God's Heart for Foster Kids

A 30 Day Devotional Guide

My heart-felt thanks goes out to those who contributed to this little book in one way or another. The cover art was provided by a foster kid– thank you for sharing with me. Some of you told me stories– others graciously allowed your own stories to be told. And others provided encouragement, prayers, technical assistance, and anything else I needed. Most of all, you believed in my dream to tell the stories that are so close to me. Thank you for everything.

fixable. Who I don't spend much time with because the yield seems so low, so unlikely to be worth anything of value. Who I don't love as much as I should because I don't think it will matter. But we are not in this to throw out kids, to deem them as old and useless, but rather to REdeem them, to give them opportunities to be made new and useful.

God, give me new eyes today – ones that can see what is possible.

"For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future..." Jeremiah 29:11 (NIV)

Prayer: Dear God, these are Your children. They were Your children yesterday living under a bridge, and they will be Your children tomorrow in a foster home. Only You know the divine plan for each of these children. Remind us gently and often that You will, and always have, taken care of that which is Yours. Thank You for loving these children. Amen.

Reflections:

Day 30

Old Made New

It was a balmy 95 degrees on the San Antonio river walk. As the boat drifted along on its half-hour sightseeing voyage, the captain was commenting on points of interest, and then he said something that caught my ear. He said, "Here in San Antonio, we don't like to get rid of things that are old. We prefer to rehabilitate them, and make them into something that is new."

At 16, she was used to taking care of herself. From the few stories she shared, I knew that life had been chaos, and I suspected that what she spoke barely scratched the surface of what childhood was actually like for her. Her family tree included generations of substance abuse and domestic violence. I asked how she coped and she laughed a little. "I used to smoke 2 packs of cigarettes a day – started when I was 7. By 10 I was drinking alcohol every day. But that's in the past – I've been clean for a year." She went on to tell me that most people just saw her as yet another chapter in the old story of a broken family – a kid with no hope and no future. But then she met a teacher who was different. Who paid extra attention to her. Offered to help her after school so she could catch up with her peers. Believed in her. Told her how she could be different from her family history. How she could be somebody new.

The truth is I've seen teens in foster care who I haven't believed were

My name is Deb Shropshire. I'm a pediatrician, which is a great surprise to those who know me, because I don't really like kids all that much. But when I was in medical school I fell in love with foster kids. Fell in love with families that struggle and foster families who courageously take in kids that don't belong to them. Fell in love with case workers who sacrifice way more than an 8 hour work day. Fell in love with police officers and judges who agonize over every decision.

Over the years I have interacted with around 25,000 kids in foster care. Each has a unique life experience, and yet there are common themes in them as well. It is my desire to share with you a sense of the struggles they encounter, while protecting the details of the life of each individual. For that reason, what you are about to read is not individually accurate – details have been modified and stories have been merged to protect the individuals who experienced them - but it certainly is collectively authentic.

These are the stories of the people I love. Stories of heartache and hope. Of getting lost and being found. Of seeing God in unexpected places. I hope they inspire you, but more than that, I hope they distress you. I hope that you won't be able to sleep. That your stomach will be tied in knots. That you will no longer be content with a safe, sheltered life but instead will be transformed into someone who is passionate about those who are broken. About those who are oppressed. Who are desolate. Those who are closest to the heart of God.

www.fosteringhopeproject.org

Day 1

Home Away From Home

My boss waved at me impatiently. We were headed to tour the shelter – a small clinic was located there, and he wanted me to become its physician. We drove a few miles, and then parked in front of a low brick building with no sign. We took the tour. Offices. Dorm-style bedrooms with a small dresser. A half-court gym that reminded me of my own grade school. As buildings go, it wasn't too bad. A little institutional, but not too bad.

Then I saw them – children. Everywhere.

Babies. Toddlers. Kids. Teenagers. Moving in small groups through the halls and rooms, led by direct care staff from lunch to naps, school to free time. A few days ago they were at home with their families. Now, because of what their families have done or neglected to do, now they are homeless. Motherless. Fatherless. And maybe, hopeless. Sure, they have food and shelter. But this was no home. There were no homes. No families waiting to hold them, to comfort them, to encourage them. They were practically orphans. Kids whose parents are alive, but aren't present. Aren't there to bandage your knee when you fall down, or tuck you in at night. Orphans. American orphans.

mons and evils too, and keep their hearts so pure and true. God bless one and God bless all, the innocent victims of the fall. Help me Father heed the call and love these hearts so very small. And when they wake by morning's break, may joy and peace be theirs to take. Amen.

Reflections:

Did you know?

Fewer than 10% of all child abuse allegations are related to sexual abuse. Yet 25% of ALL WOMEN say they experienced sexual abuse as a child.

Day 29

Heaven Meets Earth

He was a three-and-a-half feet tall bundle of emotion. In a few short years, he had unfortunately witnessed much more bad than good, a fact that became painfully clear to his foster parents as he ran screaming through the house. As they struggled to settle his fears, their silent prayers were filled with doubt. What could they do? They weren't equipped to handle a kid like this. Finally the screaming stopped, and there was silence, except for the quiet sobs of a little broken heart. The man fell to his knees. "We will never hurt you." At these simple words the sobs stopped. Time seemed to stand still as child and adult locked eyes. Then the most unexpected thing – a sloppy, wet, little boy kiss planted firmly on his foster dad's cheek. He ran off to play, leaving his caregivers stunned, realizing that heaven met earth for just a moment that day.

But let all who take refuge in you be glad; let them ever sing for joy. Spread your protection over them, that those who love your name may rejoice in you. Psalm 5:11 (NIV)

Prayer for Foster Children: Now I lay me down to sleep, Lord these precious babes are yours to keep. Shield their hearts from fear and pain; pouring grace like gentle rain. As they close their eyes in slumber, we beseech you Father, for blessings abundant. Cover them in peace and faith, a hedge of angels before them place; banish the de-

I was horrified. I didn't sleep for days. And I knew without a doubt that I would be back here. That I would do something about this.

Pure and genuine religion in the sight of God the Father means caring for orphans and widows in their distress and refusing to let the world corrupt you. James 1:27 (NLT)

Prayer for Shelter Workers: Lord, give these workers the ability to see beyond the hurt, scars, and fears and truly love and care for these children. Renew their hearts for their difficult jobs and refresh their spirit to bestow compassion and love to each who cross their paths. Amen.

Reflections (a space for you to write your thoughts as you read each day):

Day 2

Where Am I?

I hate moving. When I was a kid, my family moved every year or two, and it always made me sick. Hugging the toilet sick. The whole time the U-Haul was being loaded.

I didn't really get any pleasure out of seeing my new bedroom or exploring a new neighborhood. Mostly I spent the first few days worrying. Wondering if anyone knew where I was. Would I be able to get on the right bus at school? And off at the right stop? I didn't even know my address – how would the bus driver? Would my grandparents be able to find us for my birthday party? And how would Santa know where we were?

Those nerves could be largely settled by one simple thing – getting mail. Not mail for my parents, mail for ME. Mail meant that someone knew where I was. Mail meant I wasn't lost. Mail meant I was thought of. And, if I was lucky and it was from my grandparents, it usually included stuff – stickers, toys, activity books, crayons – you get the picture.

Foster kids move a lot too – an average of 4 times in 20 months, and among kids who age out of foster care at 18, a third moved more than 8 times while they were in custody. Each move means a new house,

trusting people. Got burned a few times. But the truth is that trusting people is part of our DNA. Without it we aren't fully able to engage the humanity around us. Aren't fully able to enjoy all that a relationship offers. It is not something to be entered into carelessly, to be sure. But if we are able to trust and be trusted, we will experience an unusual depth to our relational interactions.

That kid needed someone to trust. And I needed the reminder that so do I.

By yourself you're unprotected. With a friend you can face the worst. Ecclesiastes 4:12 (MSG)

Reflections:

Day 28

Trust

I remember it like it happened yesterday. She was 14, and in my office for a check-up. We talked through some of the normal stuff that I like to know – how she is doing in this foster home, her school grades, whether she has good friends. Oh, and what about boys? On that day the conversation was easy, although it hadn't always been. After a few moments of catching up, she handed me a notebook. The cover was faded blue and torn a little bit. It was also a little discolored, as if water had spilled on it. Or perhaps tears. I didn't say anything, but my eyes must have asked the question. "It's my story," she answered. "My counselor made me write it, then told me I had to find someone I trust to show it to. I have carried it around a while, but I decided I wanted to show it to you."

I opened the pages slowly, carefully. Contained there were stories, poems, and drawings, each representing a piece of her history. Stories about her family, about loss and grief, but also joy and excitement. Pictures of her siblings, who she rarely saw but thought of often. I sat next to her on the exam table as we thumbed through the pages, and she filled me in on even more details than the pages contained.

It was a holy moment – a sacred time. One that changed me. Like many people, somewhere between childhood and adulthood I quit

new neighborhood, new school. Each move means you lose stuff that matters to you – stuff like pictures and drawings and stories you have written and favorite CD's. Each move means new rules – new bed-times, new chores, new ways to fold the towels and make your bed.

And, they wonder if anyone knows where they are.

O Lord, you have examined my heart and know everything about me. You know when I sit down or stand up. You know my thoughts even when I'm far away. You see me when I travel and when I rest at home. You know everything I do. You know what I am going to say even before I say it, Lord. You go before me and follow me.
Psalm 139:1-5 (NLT)

Reflections:

Day 3

Someone Else's Child

He was a big man, with a full beard and broad shoulders and calloused hands that looked like they knew a good days' work. He didn't say much, just listened to my questions and nodded as his wife supplied the answers. "We think he was born on time, and he seems pretty healthy, but we don't know much else. We heard that his mom was very young, and that she wasn't in a very good position to take care of him." This baby was lucky, moving from the hospital straight to their home. I knew that a half dozen other babies were lying at the foster shelter as we spoke, waiting for a place to go.

He edged closer to the table, watching my every move as I examined the infant, as if he were concerned I might miss something or be too rough. Only when the boy was wrapped snug in a blanket and tucked safely in his wife's arms did he relax a little. "How long have you been foster parents?" I asked. "Four years," he replied. "Seven kids, and I miss them all. I wonder what they will grow up to be. If somehow I was able to have an impact on them. Never knew I could love someone else's child like that."

It is a special thing to be a dad. But it is a divine calling to be the dad of someone else's child. A holy opportunity. Are you up for it?

the baby have been placed in foster care? Social services was involved, and knew that the family was struggling, but they hadn't seen any cause for removing the child. So many questions. So much pain. At such a high price. The baby's mom touched her arm, and then fell into her sobbing, needing desperately to be held.

The world wasn't black and white any more. It was gray. A terrible, but also wonderful shade of gray. As a young lady became the closest thing to God that a struggling family has ever seen.

I suspect that many more families will see God because of her and her new favorite color - gray...

Christ's love has moved me to such extremes. His love has the first and last word in everything we do. 2 Corinthians 5:14 (MSG)

Reflections:

Day 27

My Favorite Color is Gray

She met the young couple during a spring break mission project. They lived at a local homeless shelter, and as she ate lunch with them one day, she began to connect with them. She heard about their pain, saw firsthand their poverty. And at the same time watched them hang onto each other for dear life.

The official project might have been over, but her calling was just beginning. She served them. She took them to the grocery store. Roped her fiancé' and her friends and her church into helping with all sorts of projects, from job hunting to assisting with housing. When they found out their little family was growing, she rejoiced with them. Threw them a baby shower.

This kind of service isn't free. She worried – a lot. Had some sleepless nights. Spent money on them instead of herself. And then one night the phone rang. It was the hospital. Someone had injured the baby, and he was very ill. Might not survive. She should come right away.

As she stood next to the crib holding the lifeless little baby, her mind raced through a thousand scenarios. Should she have helped them as much as she did? Maybe it was enabling. Or maybe she could have helped a little more and prevented such a terrible outcome. Should

...an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save people from their sins"...When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. Matthew 1:20-21, 24 (NIV)

Prayer for Foster Families: Father, bless those families who have selflessly stepped out on faith and followed your Biblical commands to care for someone else's child. May these children grow and prosper while in their care. Amen.

Reflections :

Day 4

Orphan

"I'm not adoptable," he stated flatly. "What?" I was surprised by his comment. "I'm. Not. Adoptable." He repeated it more loudly, as if perhaps he thought I was hard of hearing. He was sitting on my exam table, and I had just been looking in his ears and asking him about school and friends and girls. Then the conversation turned to family. His parents had lost their rights years ago.

"I went to this adoption party, and I overheard some people say that I'm not adoptable because I am too old." At that, tears welled up in his eyes and began to spill down his face. He took a few deep breaths and went on. "I met some people who wanted to adopt a son. They talked to me for a little while but then moved on to meet other children, and I overheard them saying that I was too old, that no one would want to adopt someone my age." His eyes were dry now, but sad. "All I used to want was to be adopted. I don't understand why no one wants me."

My mind was spinning, quickly assessing my own family situation. Did I want to add a 15 year old boy with 10 years of foster care baggage to the mix? No. I told him that I thought he was perfectly adoptable, and that I was sure someone would come along who wanted him. It sounded lame even to me.

She came frequently to the clinic while I was there – at first just to hang out and talk. Then with some minor complaints – an occasional headache or stomachache. Then more serious ones. Weight loss. Sleeplessness. Depression. Her siblings left the shelter one by one, each to a relative. But no one wanted her. And her soul died. Her hope died. Right in front of me.

We cry when the body dies. But who cries when the soul dies? Who cries for foster kids? Who will cry for her?

*Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn.
Romans 12:15 (NIV)*

Prayer: God, I am so grateful that you love us even when we don't feel loveable. Show us how to tell all 8046 foster children that they are unconditionally loved each and every day. Send me. Amen.

Reflections:

Day 26

Who Will Cry For Me?

She was 15, the eldest of 4 siblings. Life had not been kind. Her parents had died when she was 12, and after living with a couple of different relatives, her aunt had reluctantly taken them in. The basics were provided – food, shelter, education – but there wasn't much emotional connection, so at a young age she took on the responsibility of "mothering" her siblings.

I remember the first day I met her. She had just arrived at the shelter and was very upbeat and smiling. Which seemed strange. When I inquired why she was there, her eyes got more serious. Her aunt had gone on a trip and left them alone. She had tried very hard to take care of them. But they were beginning to run out of food in the house. She was worried, and asked their neighbor for help – the neighbor provided them some food, but also contacted the authorities and the kids were picked up.

She was OK with being at the shelter – OK with not having to stress about providing for her siblings. She was hopeful about the future – she wanted to be a pediatrician and hammered me with lots of questions about college, med school, and what it was like to work with sick children. It was impossible not to fall in love with her spunk and her enthusiasm.

"Do YOU want me? Would YOU ever adopt me?"

I was frozen. Of course I wanted him to have a family; I just didn't want the effort of being it. He could sense my struggle, and his face changed again, this time looking reserved and emotionless. "It's OK," he said. "My case worker says I need to spend the next couple of years learning how to take care of myself anyway." Head down, I left the room and went on to the rest of my day, but I never forgot him. And I didn't sleep for a week. And I felt like a fraud. And I have always wondered if he should have been MY son.

If I speak in the tongues of men and angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or clanging cymbal – 1 Corinthians 13:1 (NIV)

Prayer for Older Children: Today, we are specifically lifting up the older children in state custody. Father, life has been hard for these children. Love them as only You can. Place people in their lives who can give them hope for the future, and show them what a future with You can be. Amen.

Reflections:

Day 5

Numbers

Numbers are an important part of our everyday lives. We use them to help us connect to others on our cell phones, to tell us which seat to sit in on a plane, and to help us find the correct highway. In the world of foster kids, one important number is the number of kids in custody. Thankfully, in Oklahoma that number has been declining, from 12,000 a couple of years ago to just about 8,000 today. There are lots of ideas about why the number is declining, and certainly lots of excitement. And there should be.

That said, do not think for one moment that the work with these kids and their families is done, that DHS no longer needs the community to step up. I would argue the exact opposite.

There aren't any fewer families who struggle.

Life is difficult. Parenting is hard if there are two of you and you aren't worried about putting gas in the car or the next meal on the table. What if you are a single parent? What if it costs you more for a week of daycare than you earn in a week of work? What if a good day is one where the electricity and the water are both on at your house?

"Everyone here is a grade behind," I said again. "It's because you have moved a lot, right? And every school has a different curriculum, different schedule. Plus, it's not like you haven't had other things to think about. Don't worry about it, just keep going. Keep learning. Keep showing up." A faint smile, a brief hug, and then she was gone.

She needed what we all need. Acceptance. Validation. Encouragement. She needed to know that it was OK to keep going.

"They will fight against you but will not overcome you, for I am with you and will rescue you," declares the Lord. Jeremiah 1:19 (NIV)

Reflections:

Day 25

Just Keep Going

She was 13 when I met her. She was polite but a little distant and suspicious of me – I suspect that she saw me as yet another adult with lots of questions to ask, but no compelling reason to care about or even consider her answers. I rattled through my usual list. Any major illnesses? Allergies? Medications? Feeling OK today? Then, a question that struck a nerve. “What grade are you in?” Her head dropped, and the walls defending her soul lowered for a second, revealing shame. “6th, but I am supposed to be in 7th”.

A common answer – I’ve heard it a thousand times. Educational delay is a common struggle for kids in foster care. The average foster kid is one full grade behind their peers by the time they reach 6th grade. The lack of life stability, both before and after they enter foster care, causes them to miss valuable chunks of school. They change schools frequently, often several times a year. And even if they are able to attend, exactly how are they supposed to pay attention? Can you imagine sitting through math class wondering if anyone knows it is your birthday? Could you learn about history and ignore the thought that your own life is likely sooner to be written on the obituary page than the history book?

My heart broke for her. “No worries – everyone here is a grade behind.” Her head snapped up, and her eyes met mine with a question.

Look around you. On your block. At your kids’ school. Or the grocery store, or at church. There are hurting people everywhere. People who need to eat, need a ride, need a babysitter.

Or perhaps they need the most important thing of all – a friend.

Share your food with the hungry, and give shelter to the homeless. Give clothes to those who need them... Isaiah 58:7 (NLT)

Prayer: Lord, open my eyes to see the needs of those around me. Take away my busy-ness, my pride, my belief that my action or inaction will not make a difference. Give me your compassion. Give me your passion! Break my heart for those who are suffering. Every day. Amen.

Reflections:

Did you know?

Young adults who previously aged out of the foster system earn 1/3 less than their peers.

Day 6

A Safe Place

When I was growing up, safety was the last thing on my mind. We didn't lock our house, left our car running when we made a quick trip into the store, and walked everywhere without our parents. Not only was my community safe, my home was safe. There were no locks on bedroom doors; no worries about what might happen when my dad came home, or what my mom might be doing in the next room.

That's not true for every child. She was 10 when I met her. She still possessed a child's frame, with barely any evidence that she had begun the journey to womanhood. She looked fearful as she entered the exam room, and that fear increased in magnitude when I shut the door. I quickly explained that nothing would hurt, there wouldn't be any shots – assuming that like most kids, her concern was about seeing a doctor. But the look on her face didn't soften. I touched her arm, hoping to reassure her, but she recoiled as if I had punched her. I saw her glance quickly at the male medical student who was with me, and I began to understand her concern. He and I had reviewed her basic info before the visit – the police report stated that she had been sexually abused by a couple of male family members for the last year. She had finally told her best friend at school, who told the teacher, and now here she was.

I bumped into them a month later, again at family night. This time smiles. Excitement. The mom came straight over to me and began filling me in. She had taken the baby to the DHS office. Along with diapers, and clothes, and bottles. And a photo album, filled with pictures of the baby. And one of them all together. She met the aunt, and the birth mother was there too. Both were amazed that she had brought all the baby items. But mostly they were amazed at the pictures. There was hugging – a lot of it. And gratitude, and tears, but this time they didn't hurt so badly.

It was a reminder that moms love their children, even when they aren't able to take care of them. That they are grateful for others who come along and love them, too, even if they aren't able to fully express it. That even in the face of loss and grief, love wins. It wins.

No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us. 1 John 4:12 (NIV)

Prayer for Kinship Families: Lord, bless the kinship families who take in children who are part of their extended family. Give them the grace to change their lives to unselfishly love a child who is not their own. Keep them mindful that all plans are your plans, Lord.

Reflections:

Day 24

The Gift

I saw her crying, and it caught my attention. It was family night at a local restaurant, and while my kids played, I was people watching. And that's when I saw her. Crying. She looked to be early 30's - not much younger than me. Next to her was a baby carrier with a small infant inside. He was a different race than the family, and I wondered what their story was.

Didn't take much to get the story. They were foster parents who wanted to adopt. A month ago they had been called about a newborn who the worker felt certain would be adopted – the birth mother had a lot of history with DHS and had lost other kids. It was a done deal. At least in the minds of the worker and the parents. They went shopping. They bought baby furniture. Their friends threw them a shower. They celebrated. The baby came, and they fell in love. Took family pictures. Visited grandparents.

Then, a call. Can you bring the baby to the office? There is an aunt, and the baby is going to live with relatives. Devastation. Grief. Anger. Loss. Exhaustion. Emptiness. The mom mustered enough energy to say on the phone, "No, it's supper time for my family. I will meet you tomorrow." This was their last meal together. Family night at a local restaurant.

Safe. At least from our point of view. But safety is not just a location, not just about being in a place where you aren't harmed. It is a state of mind. It is being in a mental place where a door closing doesn't cause your heart to race. It is being able to experience healthy, normal human touch without withdrawing. It is about being able to sleep without wondering when your night is going to be interrupted.

Safety is more than separation from danger. It is finding a place where you are loved, accepted, and cherished. Where body, soul, and spirit can thrive. THAT is the kind of safety we must seek to provide.

In peace I will lie down and sleep, for you alone, Lord, make me dwell in safety. Psalm 4:8 (NIV)

Reflections:

Did you know?

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE's), which include abuse and neglect, result in much higher rates of adult health problems such as obesity, alcoholism, drug abuse, and depression.

Day 7

The Invisible Moving the Visible

Her email asked how she could become more involved with helping foster kids. She wanted to volunteer at the shelter, or perhaps become a mentor. We met to discuss the options – find her a good fit. At 21, she seemed more mature than most 40 year olds I knew. I wanted to know more about her, and over several cups of coffee her story unfolded. Not too great of a childhood. Instability. Loneliness. Abuse. Pain. Lots of pain. Then, at 14, it all changed. She went with friends to a church event. She didn't even own a Bible. Had no context for the songs being sung or the message she was hearing. But soon she found herself moving toward the front of the auditorium. More importantly she found her soul moving toward her Creator. How did that happen? How did a kid who barely wondered if God existed wind up as a sold out follower of Christ? Depends on who you ask. Luck, perhaps. Or fate. But I would say it is an example of the invisible moving the visible. Of God reaching into humanity and interrupting the downward spiral of a family tree.

God moves, in the lives of children who desperately need a refuge, a father, a comforter, a friend, a savior. We are invited to be a visible part of His invisible movement. Will you join Him?

and being a mom someday. "My life is a mosaic," she told me. "There are a lot of pieces, but now they fit together to make a picture."

Not just a picture. A masterpiece. A beautiful work of art.

*Some of you will rebuild the deserted ruins of your cities. Then you will be known as a builder of walls and a restorer of homes.
Isaiah 58:12 (NLT)*

Prayer: Thank you Father for Your amazing love. Show these kids that whatever they have brought in with them to that shelter or foster home, You can wipe it clean. Show them there is love for them, healing for them, and hope for them. Help them feel Your amazing grace. Amen

Reflections:

Day 23

Mosaic

At 16, she clearly had more street smarts than most people do at twice her age. On the surface, she was really kind of a mess to look at. Her skin bore the evidence of darker days, as superficial scars covered her wrists and thighs. She had hoped that causing pain on the outside would alleviate the pain on the inside, but that only worked for a little while. She also sported a couple of not-very-well-done tattoos and several piercings that I could see. She grinned a little and mentioned that there were others, but I left that subject alone.

I wanted to know more about her. Her parents were drug addicts; high on whatever they could buy or steal most of her life. At age 7 she was living with them in a tent by a lake, and it was at that age she learned to smoke by sneaking leftover cigarettes when they were passed out. By 10 she was an alcoholic, and by 13 had used almost every street drug known. At some point she could no longer self-medicate her reality, and she began to think about ending her life. By anyone's standards, her life was a pile of shattered pieces.

Then she met this boy. A really good boy. Who told her she was smart. And funny. And beautiful. And who believed in her. One by one, with patience and care, he began to glue her life back together. Piece by shattered piece. Until she was off drugs. And alcohol free. And in a GED program. And thinking about the future, and marriage,

"... (God), this original creation – the 'wind hovering over the water' creation, the invisible moving the visible, a baptism into a new life..." – John 3:5 (MSG)

Reflections:

Did you know?

Three-fourths of the children who enter foster care are neglected, lacking in resources such as food, shelter or supervision. They are also often lacking in relationships.

Day 8

Friday Night Lights

The shrill ringing of the phone interrupted my Friday afternoon daydreams. I didn't recognize the number. The voice on the line was soft-spoken, but pressured. "Dr. Shropshire, is there any chance you could talk to the shelter? I just took a baby there, but the baby has a rash and they want me to take him to the ER first." She paused. "Tonight is my son's very first football game. I've missed so many of his school events, but I promised him this time..." Her voice trailed off.

Being a case worker is way more than a job, it is a calling. To do it well requires tremendous personal sacrifice. Missing ballgames. Not getting home for supper. Midnight phone calls. Stress. Tears.

I looked at my watch. Clinic was almost done. The shelter was on my way home. It would be easy to stop by there...

Let's keep a firm grip on the promises that keep us going. He always keeps his word. Let's see how inventive we can be in encouraging love and helping out... Hebrews 10:23-24 (MSG)

An aspirin won't fix that. Only one thing will – love. Massive, overwhelming, unconditional love. And she hasn't found that yet.

*God's a safe-house for the battered, a sanctuary during bad times.
Psalm 9:9 (MSG)*

Reflections:

Did you know?

Half of young adults who previously aged out of the foster system have a treatable mental health diagnosis, including depression or post-traumatic stress disorder. Unfortunately, they are 1/3 less likely than their peers to have health insurance.

Day 22

Chronic

In medicine, some health conditions never go away. They irritate and nag and keep you from functioning at full strength. They suck the energy out of you. Some life conditions do that too.

She was 17, and counting the days until her birthday when she could be “out on her own”. She was going to move in with a friend, she told me, and try to get a job, although she had only completed the 9th grade so far, and thought that being employed at a fast food restaurant was her best option. She answered my questions in a somewhat robotic, monotonous voice, and she seemed almost able to predict what the question was before I had asked it. Until I asked about her family. Then the robot vanished. Her voice shook, and her eyes filled with pain.

Lots of it.

First in foster care at age 2. Back and forth between the system and home until she was school-age. Parent’s rights terminated. In several foster homes. Then adopted. Until it got hard. Then back into foster care. Now, almost on her own. But with no hope, no future, no life. Just pain. Chronic, long-standing pain.

Prayer for Case Workers: These things we ask for case workers: Strength to continue through each day despite weariness; courage to fight complacency; discernment to see the hearts of the families; and renewal to see each family as human, and every child as a child of God. Amen.

Reflections:

Did you know?

Half of the teens involved in the juvenile justice system have previously been in foster care. Half or more of the adults in prison were in foster care as children.

Day 9

Eye of the Storm

She sat quietly, blinking away tears, as she read again the mother's day poem. Next to her lay a stack of construction paper cards and colorful trinkets made by her kids to honor the day. But this gift – it was different. It was straight from the heart of her daughter.

Her mind drifted back four years to the day the girl came to live in their home. They had interacted at the occasional family gathering, but this was a whole new kind of relationship. The nearly 13-year old brought very few physical possessions, but the emotional baggage that tagged along could have filled up the house. Abuse. Brokenness. Anger. Sadness. Distrust. Rage.

There had been many good days, that was sure. But many struggles as well. Often the relationship between the two was like being beaten by the wind and rain of a hurricane. Yet somehow they struggled together against the storm. Held onto each other. Survived. Cared. Healed. Redeemed. Loved.

The storm isn't over, but on mother's day they were able to rest for a little while. As words from a chosen daughter filled the heart of an adoptive mom.

ing things at his little brother. When he intervened, his mom had dragged him out on the front porch and locked the door.

He began to walk down the street, slowly at first, but then with increasing confidence, toward the fire station a block away. "Can you help me sir? My sister and brother are in danger, and it's my job to protect them. Can you help me? We need a better life than this. There has to be something better."

Courage is found in many different places. Sometimes it is packaged in the small body of a 6 year old. What about you? Will you be courageous?

Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go."
Joshua 1:9 (NIV)

Reflections:

Day 21

The Protector

The October sky was blue, but there was certainly a chill in the air. His small frame, covered with a thin, long-sleeve t-shirt, didn't offer much of a barrier against the breeze. He sat on the steps of his home, trying to figure out what to do. At 6, he was the caretaker of his 3 and 2 year old siblings. He got them up in the mornings and fixed them breakfast – had an old burn stripe on his finger from touching the hot coils of the toaster. He knew how to make macaroni and cheese, and how to microwave soup and fix sandwiches. He made sure their noses were wiped, and he changed his little sister's diapers the best he could. And he tucked them into bed at night. All the while his mom spent most of the day either passed out on the couch or away from the house, looking for her next fix.

Most of the time he didn't mind helping. He knew his mom had a lot she was struggling with, and he wanted to make it as easy on her as he could. He loved her very much, and as he shivered against the wind, his mind wandered back to days when she read him stories and gave him big hugs. When it seemed like she loved him. He hadn't gotten that kind of attention for at least a couple of years. And his siblings never had, except from him. That thought snapped him back to the reality of the porch. He tried the door again, but it was still locked. His mom had woken up in a bad mood and was screaming and throw-

You pulled me out of the dark; you saved me from could've beens.

You've been here with me, through good and bad, thick and thin

And haven't given up.

You're strong when I'm weak; you're peaceful when I'm out of control

You're my mom, my role model, my hero; I love you and

I wanna be just like you.

My grace is enough; it's all you need. My strength comes into its own in your weakness. 2 Corinthians 12:9 (MSG)

Reflections:

Day 10

The Overcomer

The lady looked older than me, but it turned out she was a couple years younger. She had 6 kids – the first was born when she was only a kid herself. They had been in foster care for several years. But were now back with her, and soon DHS would sign off on her as a mom.

At that point in the conversation, perhaps a normal person with manners and social grace would have just stopped – congratulated her and bowed out of the conversation. But I couldn't help myself. I was compelled to know the whole story – to know HER. She had been on drugs – first painkillers, then marijuana, then meth. The guys she hung out with were mean, but they supplied her drug habit. Eventually it caught up with her, and the kids were picked up. She was devastated, but she was also addicted. For two more years she was unsuccessful in her struggle against it. Then she began to break free. She went through rehab – ALL the way through. Then a half-way house. Then outpatient counseling. Then she found a job. Then she got an apartment. Then she got her kids back.

What? How did that happen? These stories don't usually have a happy ending. What was the key?

We should be concerned. And may that concern fuel our actions. May it compel us to get out of our comfortable lives where most of our concern is for ourselves, and to be concerned for someone else for a change.

They tried to heal my people's serious injuries as if they were small wounds. They said, "It's all right, it's all right." But really, it is not all right. Jeremiah 8:11 (NCV)

Prayer for The Church: Forgive us, God, for ignoring Your commands and pleas to care for the widows, the orphans and the oppressed - the very ones You hold dear to Your heart. Open our hearts to no longer turn our backs on these children. Move Your people to demonstrate Your love. Amen.

Reflections:

Day 20

No Concerns

There are no concerns.”

I stared at the paper, but the words didn't change. "There are no concerns." There it was, my handwriting in black ink on the medical chart. In medical language it means that the patient isn't sick. They don't feel bad. Nothing is wrong. Normally that is a good thing. But this time, as I sat filling out yet another medical form for yet another child entering the emergency foster shelter, I found myself overtaken with emotion.

Anger. Disgust. Frustration. Sadness. Worry.

I wrote that there were no concerns. But that isn't true. I have concerns. Lots of concerns. Concerns about these children and what they will think about and what they will feel when the lights go out at night and the shelter is quiet. About where they will live next, and whether the family who takes them in will treat them as their own or merely as transients. About whether their social worker will get to know them as human beings or just by a case number. About when they will see their family again, and whether that reunion will be filled with joy or anger or fear.

My parents believed in me. My friend believed in me. My counselor believed in me. My new boss believed in me. "You are an overcomer!" I said. Her eyes met mine, and she smiled.

When we begin to see people for who they were created to be, instead of who they are on the surface, it is easier to believe in them. And when WE believe in them, it is easier for them to begin to believe in themselves. I want to believe in people. In their potential. In the possibilities of their lives. In the awareness that a bad decision is not the same thing as a bad person. In the knowledge that we all make mistakes and none of us is perfect. In the hope that the future can be different than the past.

*He lifted me out of the pit of despair, out of the mud and the mire.
He set my feet on solid ground and steadied me as I walked along.
Psalm 40:2 (NLT)*

Reflections:

Day 11

Influence

She was not quite 2 when they took her in from the foster agency. Her mom had a lot of struggles and could barely take care of herself, much less a toddler. Her new foster family fell in love with her immediately, enjoying her laughter and the silly tricks that she would do, but especially the brief moments at bedtime when she would sit in one of their laps and snuggle. Over time, both she and her biologic mom achieved milestones – hers including learning how to write her name and memorizing her address and phone number; her mom’s had more to do with parenting classes and a steady job. And after some time, it became apparent that they would reunite.

They moved a lot – never could quite achieve the stability that most people crave. She lived with her mom some, as well as a variety of extended relatives. She called her old foster family every once in a while – she had never forgotten the phone number – and every single time they inquired about her new address and made a trip to the post office, sending off a box of goodies.

Art supplies. Candy. Books. But most of all, love.

They were intentional in their influence. They didn’t just answer the phone and have a conversation, they acted. Even though it was pain-

friendship? On offering to weave your life together with someone else’s simply because you are both human, rather than because they can do something for you. Want to be the hands and feet of Christ? Start by finding someone who needs a friend and losing yourself, your interests, your expectations. Start by falling in love with others.

One who has unreliable friends soon comes to ruin, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother. Proverbs 18:24 (NIV)

Reflections:

Day 19

Bloodsuckers

I would guess she was early 20's, although the fatigue in her face made her look a little older. Growing up in foster care had certainly not preserved her youth. She sat quietly, watching the toddler explore every corner of the room. "Is parenting getting easier?" I wondered. She nodded, and responded that they were in a pretty good place, past infancy but not quite to the terrible 2's and 3's. She enjoyed him – that was apparent. "You have a place to live?" Yes. "Enough food?" Yes again. "Friends your own age?" Hesitation, then no. "Why?" I asked.

They all want something from me, you know? Something I'm not willing to give. Drugs. Sex. Money. You name it. The people I know who are my age are a bunch of parasites.

The impact of her statement silenced me, and my mind raced to evaluate my own friendships. How valuable it was to have people my own age around me, who simply wanted to share conversations about raising kids, or maintaining a marriage, or shouldering the responsibilities of life. Friends on whom I could call for help without the expectation of "payment" for their favor.

What value can be placed on unconditional love? On unconditional

ful. Even though they worried about the fact that every phone call was from a different phone number in a new state. Even though it cost them.

So how did it turn out? On her 18th birthday, the phone rang again. "Mom, can I come home?" You can guess what the answer was.

I was hungry and you fed me, I was thirsty and you gave me a drink, I was homeless and you gave me a room... Matthew 25:35 (MSG)

Reflections:

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Did you know?

Only half of children who age out of foster care will complete high school or earn a GED. Only 2% complete college.

Day 12

Healing Touch

People go the doctor to be healed. To get relief from their pain. But I don't always know how to heal. Don't always know what to say or what to do.

She was 14, with thick auburn hair that fell in unruly layers around her face. She was beautiful, but rough. Even in her short years she had experienced her share of hardship, and it showed, in the stiffness of her posture and the edge in her voice. I found out that she was in 8th grade, and liked math but didn't want anyone to think she was a nerd. She had a brother but didn't get to see him much. She was not a stranger to foster care – had slept in other people's homes off and on for as long as she could remember. Said she'd learned how to fold towels "correctly" 10 different ways.

As she talked, she waved her arms and I saw them. Words carved across her knuckles. Others over the back of her hands and up her forearms.

HATE. WORTHLESS. CRAZY.

For in Christ, neither our most conscientious religion nor disregard of religion amounts to anything. What matters is something far more interior: faith expressed in love. Galatians 5:6 (MSG)

Prayer for Biological Families: Today, we lay before You the trials and tribulations of the biological families in the child welfare system. Grant them fortitude, faith, and patience. Give them the strength to put aside the past and look to the future; show them peace in chaos and wisdom in turmoil. Amen.

Reflections:

Day 18

Deep

So I have this friend. And it turns out that we have something unusual in common. We both love foster kids, but that isn't the uncommon part. What sets my friend apart is that she loves the birth parent of her foster kids. In case you blew past that, let me say it again.

She loves the birth parent of her foster kids.

She believes she is called to do that – to create opportunities for a mom that has never had anything. To offer relationship that doesn't have strings attached. Her husband believes it too. And her friends are starting to. In fact, she rounded up a whole army of people who are willing to go deep with her.

To get dirty. To work hard. To hurt. To get frustrated. To pray. To encourage. To support. To hope. And most of all? To love.

It's really what we should be about.

Scabbed. Fresh. Evidence of pain that extended much deeper than the wounds that marked her skin. She seemed surprised when I touched her arms, gently massaging antibiotic ointment into each line, grieving with each stroke.

How do I fix that kind of pain? How do I speak life to someone who has only known death? I don't always know how to heal. But I do know how to touch, how to provide the most basic of human contact. So do you. Are you willing?

When he saw the man, he felt compassion for him. Going over to him, the Samaritan soothed his wounds... Luke 10:33-34 (NLT)

Reflections:

Day 13

More Than Walking

“Do you recognize him?” she asked. I stared intently at the boy. There was something about him that seemed vaguely familiar, but he certainly didn’t stand out to me. The medical chart said it had been a half dozen years since I had seen him, and he was a baby then. My mind wandered back to a hospital room, where I had discussed his future with the foster mom who had come to pick him up. The brain injury he had suffered at the hands of his mom’s boyfriend was one of the worst I’d ever seen. I was certain he was going to die, and when he didn’t, I secretly wondered if it wouldn’t have been a better outcome than the life he was now beginning. She had listened to my medical opinion, and then announced that I didn’t know what I was talking about, and that not only would he walk, he would do much more. I didn’t press the issue. We could work that out over time.

“Would you?” she asked again. “No, I don’t think so.” The school-age boy was sitting on a bench in my office playing his handheld video game. “You told me he wouldn’t walk, but he does a lot more than that. He is in school, and he draws pictures and is learning how to read.” For a half hour she went on to share the details of their life together since she had become his

Or, perhaps you could say that she is WRECKLESS. I wonder if Webster will add that one to the dictionary...

“He throws caution to the winds, giving to the needy in reckless abandon.” 2 Corinthians 9:9 (MSG)

Reflections:

Did you know?

Over 100,000 children in the U. S. are awaiting adoption.

Day 17

Wreckless

A few months ago I met this lady. She had everything going for her. Great family. Nice house. Lots of control over her day. But she had this little voice in the back of her head telling her to get involved with foster kids. It had been there for a long time, and every once in a while she would explore her options. Attend a class. Sign up for more information. That sort of thing.

Then everything changed.

She heard about a kid that didn't have anywhere else to go. Who desperately needed a family. She mentioned it to her husband, and he didn't hesitate. She made the phone call, and the next thing you know, their family grew.

To a casual observer, she may come across as reckless. After all, getting involved with this kid will take time away from her family. Will cost her some money and some tears. Will mess up her schedule. But the truth is, she isn't reckless at all. She is simply wrecked. She can't stand the idea of a kid who has no mom. Can't imagine a teen who has no home. Can't tolerate knowing about foster kids without doing something about it. Her heart is wrecked.

foster mom. She was so proud of him. She believed in him, and it had made all the difference.

The truth is, I don't know why some kids with a brain injury lie silent, fed by tubes their entire lives, while others walk and talk and play. But I do know this – hope is a powerful thing. It can change the outcome of a disease or of a life. And another thing I know? It is contagious. I left that room feeling more of it than my heart could even begin to hold.

Sometimes it is nice to be wrong...

And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us. Romans 5:5 (NIV)

Reflections:

Day 14

You Can Fly

I love to fly. I always choose a window seat right over the wing, near the jets so I can best hear the roar of the engines and watch the wing shape change as we take off and land. But I always find myself doubting that it will even work, that the plane can even get off the ground. There is too much weight. People. Baggage. And it starts too slowly – those first few feet of movement are painfully slow. But the thing about a plane is, it was made to fly. It was shaped in a specific way, and it was equipped with engines that are capable of producing tremendous thrust, if they are fueled properly. Once it gets in the air, it seems like it could stay there forever with very little effort.

Foster kids come weighed down too. With lots of baggage. *I was molested, so now I don't trust men. Or I use my body to get what I want. I was physically abused, and now I believe I am to blame for whatever I get, so I move from abusive relationship to abusive relationship. My emotional needs weren't met, so now I suck the life out of others, desperately trying to fill up my own soul.*

It is easy to believe that a kid carrying that kind of weight won't be able to get off the ground. But the truth is, they, like all humans, were made to fly. Born for it. But they need fuel. They need us to provide the thing that powers them. Encouragement. Expectation. Opportunity. Love. Hope. Without it, they are grounded. With it, if they can

Some kids feel heat and pressure every single day. It doesn't go away when the seasons change. But it CAN be relieved when we are willing to be a refuge, a safe place for those around us who need it.

But you are a tower of refuge to the poor, O Lord, a tower of refuge to the needy in distress. You are a refuge from the storm and a shelter from the heat. Isaiah 25:4 (NLT)

Prayer for Counselors/Therapists: We are so privileged to have You, O Lord, as our Counselor. We ask a special blessing today on the counselors and therapists involved with DHS cases. May they instill hope and help move families and children toward healing. Amen.

Reflections:

Day 16

Heat

Oklahoma summers are hot. The weathermen begin talking about “heat domes” around the end of June, and we know what that means. It means a high pressure system is sitting right on top of us. It means that the atmosphere has a lid right over our heads, a lid that allows the sun’s rays to find their way in but never out. It means that you can fry an egg on the sidewalk, or cook dinner on your car hood if you want to.

Heat. Pressure.

His shoulders slumped slightly, as if he carried the weight of the world on them. Quiet at first, but when I asked about his younger siblings, he spoke up, telling humorous stories about his attempts to get them somewhat out of trouble. The conversation shifted to his dad, and the quiet returned. Alcoholic, violent, angry. When his dad was awake, the kids hid. In their rooms, in the garage, under the porch. One day a neighbor saw the kids playing and brought them some lemonade. A conversation started. Over time, they felt safe. Then one night, when they needed a hiding place, they ran to the neighbor’s house. There are new challenges now, but no hiding. No drunken rage.

get off the ground, they might just fly forever.

Are you willing to fuel someone’s hopes and dreams? Willing to mentor? To tutor? To help a kid dream then help them achieve that dream? Are you willing to help someone fly?

So my dear brothers and sisters, stand strong. Do not let anything move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your work in the Lord is never wasted. 1 Corinthians 15:58 (NCV)

Reflections:

Did you know?

On any given day, there are a half-million children in foster care across the U.S.

Day 15

Redemption

Through the thin walls, she could hear the screaming of her stepdad. Cursing. Crashing. Drunken rage being taken out yet again on her family. She wished she could disappear. Wanted to die. That seemed so much more peaceful a place. But not an option – not to her.

Her eyes swept across the tiny bedroom, searching for something to relieve the pain. She reached for a nearby wooden pencil. Its eraser was long gone, and the bent metal end provided an avenue for the escape she was so desperate to find. The aluminum cut into her skin, etching the first letters of a message - HATE - onto her side. Tears from the pain of the cut mixed with tears from the pain in her heart and rolled down her cheeks.

Then, her soul quieted, as her heavenly Papa gathered her into his arms and held her close. His voice, His truth flooded her mind, and spilled out onto the worn notebook lying beside her bed.

*I'm your healer and your guide
You are valuable, you have a future
You are my precious daughter"*

The pencil, a tool Satan meant for evil, God used for good. The same pencil that started off destructive, making temporary imprints in her flesh, God used to carve a permanent note of redemption on her heart.

But you are the ones chosen by God, chosen for the high calling of priestly work, chosen to be a holy people, God's instruments to do his work and speak out for him, to tell others of the night-and-day difference he made for you – from nothing to something, from rejected to accepted. 1 Peter 2:9-10 (MSG)

Reflections:

*I know you, I love you
I liberate you, I light your path
I provide you with friends and a way out when you are stuck*