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# Closer Than Your Skin

Unwrapping the Mystery of Intimacy with God

Susan D. Hill



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P R E S S



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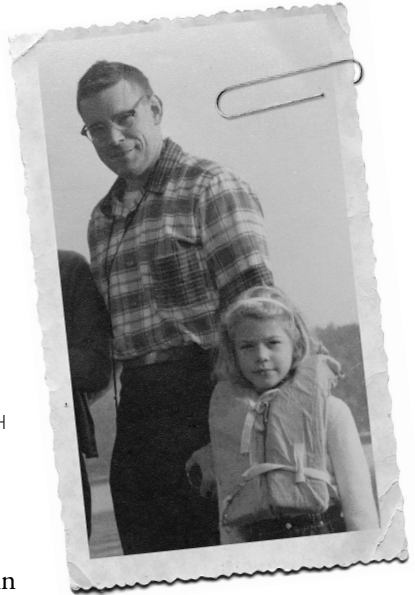
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## Basic Trust

The Father Thing Matters

*(My father) never once told me he loved me, and he never had a loving hand to lay on his children. He said once that he didn't have to tell people he loved them for them to know it... Still, it would have meant an awful lot for me to have heard it, just once, before he died.*

—JOHNNY CASH



was only twenty years old that night in New Hampshire on an empty road in a '62 Beetle. Of course, when you're twenty, you know everything. But that night I learned something new, something out of this world, something I sensed down deep but really couldn't prove. I discovered that God was real, he knew who I was, and my earthly life mattered to him. Prior to that remarkable night, I had only fuzzy ideas about God because he was intricately woven into the tapestry of my life. Let me explain.

When I was very young, my family lived on Maplewood Road, a few blocks from Lake Erie. One glorious Indian-summer day, I was

playing in the backyard. Red, yellow, and orange leaves fell in great abundance every fall, creating new materials for castle building and fun places to play hide-and-seek.

I remember my father coming down the back-door steps to find me. With great delight, I had hidden myself in the leaves, unaware that my white Keds gave me away. A mixture of fright and glee gripped my three-year-old body: Dad was a zealous tickler. I held my breath as he pretended to search for me. Seconds passed that felt like minutes. My excitement grew unbearable as the sound of crunching leaves came closer...and closer...and then stopped. He took a few more steps. My tiny body grew taut as an inflated balloon. Suddenly, he grabbed my ankle, and I popped up. My piercing squeal turned into peals of giggles for I had been found.

Leaning back, I expected to be tickled, but I looked up to see his kind eyes, his broad smile, and his arm extended toward me. Complete safety exuded from my father's strong and quiet presence. I took his warm hand, and we walked across the yard, the balmy wind swirling leaves around us.

Once inside, we slid into the red vinyl bench that curved around the kitchen table. He took an orange from the bowl on the table. With a paring knife, he sliced off the North and South poles of the peel in little round disks. After cutting the rest of the skin in longitudinal lines, he removed the remaining pieces in sections. I sat riveted, watching his skilled hands maneuver the knife. The pungent scent of orange filled the air, its mist sparkling in the sunlight. At last, he divided the peeled orange into two halves and gave me a section.

As far as I know, until that day I had never tasted an orange. As the sweet juice trickled down my chin, we leaned against each other and laughed in mutual delight. Somehow, this one random moment out of hundreds of thousands in my young life has been crystallized in amber. It is my earliest memory.

Authorities say these early memories, though seemingly arbitrary, are significant. Good or bad, they reveal the perceptions that shape our

reality. I fully believe that. Culled from my tender years, this simple snapshot shows how my world was profoundly fashioned by a loving and stable father. I say this because later it took a very small step to believe that *God* is such a father. I know I'm fortunate in this.

When Jesus taught his friends to pray, he gave them a new name for God: "Our Father."<sup>1</sup> Addressing God as a father was a radical departure from Old Testament constructs. The Jews lived with a potent mixture of terror and awe when it came to God, with no such familiarity or warmth. He was called Almighty, the One Who Parted the Red Sea, and Maker of the Cloud by Day and the Pillar of Fire by Night.<sup>2</sup> One could not presume to know him personally.

But Jesus expanded our understanding of God, even referring to him as *Abba*,<sup>3</sup> meaning "Daddy." And through Jesus, God demonstrated his *Abba* love for us. Like a zealous tickler, he wanted us to experience his strong, knowing touch and our joy at the thrill of this contact. The concept of a heavenly Daddy dovetailed with everything I knew about life. I understood it, because it was already my experience.

Over a hundred years ago, another father lay dying in his bed. Although he was admired as one of Russia's greatest writers, not many knew that Fyodor Dostoevsky was also a great father. Unlike other men of his day, he helped bathe and feed his children. He comforted his little ones at night when he heard coughing or crying. When his daughter Sonya died in infancy, he was inconsolable. To Dostoevsky, children embodied the joy of God.<sup>4</sup>

As his own life was ebbing away, he called for his children. He wanted to read them the story of the prodigal son. As the narrative goes, a son leaves his father and squanders all his inheritance on worthless things. The father grieves the loss but hopes and watches for his son's return. Eventually the son heads home, unsure if he will be welcomed. But when the father sees him coming down the road, he rushes out to meet him, covering him with kisses and assuring him all is forgiven.

When the reading ended, Dostoevsky took their small hands and looked into their tearful eyes.

My children...never forget what you have just heard. Have absolute faith in God and never despair of His pardon. I love you dearly, but my love is nothing compared with the love of God for all those He has created.... Never despair of God. You are His children; humble yourselves...and He will rejoice over your repentance.<sup>5</sup>

Later that same night, Fyodor Dostoevsky died, holding his wife's hand.

God is the all-powerful, all-knowing Creator of the universe. But the good news is he is also a *father*. In the final moments of his life, Dostoevsky wanted to impart this sacred knowledge, more than any other truth, to his children. His works are full of the same message, and subsequently, Dostoevsky became a spiritual father to many. Tens of thousands of people followed his funeral procession. Millions more have read his books. But his children heard this truth firsthand from their earthly father, who lived the words he spoke, giving substance to the true nature of God.

Of course, for countless people, this is not the case. Many dads give fathers a poor name. Some children only have bio-dads. Many fatherless souls filter life through cloudy eyes, trying to feel okay, like who cares anyway? But growing up fatherless is not okay. Innumerable people have an invisible dagger lodged deep in their hearts. The wound remains, because their fathers were emotionally unavailable, addicted, abusive, or absent. Abandonment is one of the overriding themes in today's world.

Former professional football player Bill Glass, who worked with inmates in various penitentiaries, said he never met a man in prison who loved his father. Convicts usually made allowances for mothers and occasionally sent Mother's Day cards. But there were no Father's Day cards mailed from the prison. Bill even went so far as to say that fatherlessness

may be the root of criminality, because a child without a father starts life feeling cheated already.<sup>6</sup>

In *Blue Like Jazz*, Donald Miller wrote, “I wonder why it is God refers to Himself as ‘Father’ at all. This, to me, in light of the earthly representation of the role, seems a marketing mistake. Why would God want to call Himself Father when so many fathers abandon their children?”<sup>7</sup> It’s a poignant question. Our idea of God is profoundly parallel to whatever happened with our earthly fathers. Miller himself grew up with little contact with his dad. In *To Own a Dragon*,<sup>8</sup> he wrote about the importance of separating his understanding of God from his dad’s mistakes. This distinction proves to be significant for many people’s spiritual growth.

For me, thinking of God as a loving father made sense. As a child I felt the stirrings of God all around me, but I didn’t analyze it as a separate experience. God was warm like the sunlight streaming through the window in winter. He was kind like soft pussy willows on Easter morning. He could also be strict, like when I was told to eat my spinach. But as I rode in the backseat of our Oldsmobile, I never had to worry about where life was going.

One night God reminded me about the pricelessness of a good father through a bedtime story I read to my daughters. We were reading *On the Banks of Plum Creek*, Laura Ingalls Wilder’s story about her pioneer family in the 1870s. Pa told his children not to go down to the deep places in the creek without him. But the next day was terribly hot, and Laura decided after much rationalization that she would only go down to the water for a drink. She was trying to remember with all her might what Pa had said. Down the path, she encountered a snarling badger that would not let her pass. Startled, she ran all the way home.

As she lay in bed that night, the thought of disobeying her father gnawed at her. Only the badger knew. But she suffered anyway, knowing she’d dishonored his trust. Finally she slid out of bed and tiptoed to her father who sat just outside the door playing his fiddle under the stars. Out came her tortured confession.

Then for a long time he did not say anything and Laura waited. Laura could not see his face in the dark, but she leaned against his knee *and she could feel how strong and kind he was.*<sup>9</sup>

The bedtime reading stopped there. I was undone by the love Laura felt from her father. I couldn't finish the story. My two daughters, four and seven at the time, didn't understand my tears, but we silently held each other while I wept and they wondered.

If I had failed miserably, even in much greater ways than Laura, I could still lean against my father's knee and feel his strength and his kindness. Even the prodigal son didn't know if the father would accept him in his failures. But I knew. Like Laura, I wouldn't have to see my father's face to know this. And though I can't see God's face, *strength* and *kindness* describe his presence to me.

Some will surely say, "Well, that's nice... *for you*... but what am I supposed to do?" We've all had different fathers. It may be harder for fatherless people to understand God's paternal character, but we've all experienced deficiencies of love. It's not unlike newlyweds who come from broken homes trying to figure out how to do marriage. It's not impossible to value love, even without much firsthand experience. Most of us have some concept of love—a grandfather, a mother, a teacher, a neighbor. And though God's love is vastly bigger than that, he limits himself so we can approach him without terror. Like a dad holding out an orange for his child.

Many children are not given unconditional love. Some children are handed the perfect storm—a crisis on every front. I cannot explain this. I only know that a big part of intimacy with God involves a basic trust in his character. When earthly fathers leave us scarred, our view of God is also damaged. It may feel like an emotional leap to believe God is a good father.

Even so, God promises to transform our personal history. For many it will require a step of faith, a willingness to receive a new kind of love



where you won't have to flinch. Though I share Miller's concern for God's alleged marketing mistake, my knowledge of real love keeps me from accepting that limitation.

As I reflect on that fall day when I shared an orange with my dad at the kitchen table, I see a double image of God pulling me into his red-vinyl orbit. He wants to be close and show me something new. I see the earth in his good, strong hands. He unpeels it for me, and it's beautiful, fragrant, and inviting. He wants to do this together. That's the idea here. To experience this life with him and enjoy it while it lasts. One moment soon, it will all be gone. But what remains is the relationship.

There's a Father who's already come out the door of heaven, and he's looking for his child. He knows where to find you. You may think he doesn't know where you are, because you're hiding. But he knows. Maybe you sense him approaching. It seems you've been waiting a long time, wondering if he's coming, hoping he will appear. And then finally, you feel him. He reaches for you, and the moment is thrilling and startling. You won't want to draw back when you look into his face, see his kind eyes and broad smile. His strong arm extends toward you. If you take his hand, something new will begin. Something you've never experienced before.

What I am saying comes down to a simple point: you can know this experience for yourself. Not because I've said so, not because you read it in a book or heard it from a preacher on TV. You can know because this Father understands you and knows where to find you. It can happen.

In fact, you could be anywhere when life with God begins.