

Daughter Discloses Dark Secret in 'Road Trip to Redemption'

"Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths" (Prov. 3:5-6, ESV).

I could tell something was wrong. Even in the midst of my hectic schedule and the busyness of everyday life, I had noticed changes in my middle child, a shift in her mood and appearance over the past few months. She had withdrawn a bit—removed herself from our simple weekly family life, sat out our evening dinner discussions and always had too much to do on family movie nights. She was still there, physically present, but she was emotionally checked out.

Bethany had begun to fade into a shell of her normally dramatic and exuberant teenage self. She was still an athletic, slim, blonde "Barbie doll" of a girl, but her beautiful sky-blue eyes had seemed to lose their color. They were darker now, especially with the extra mascara and eyeliner she had begun to wear. Her skin looked more frail and white than I'd ever remembered. She kept her eyes down, usually with a hoodie over her head and iPod earbuds jammed in her ears. She was trying to keep us all out. It was frustrating, irritating and disrespectful, and I had made a mental note to confront her about the many rude behaviors I had observed in her recently. My patience for her teenage angst had worn thin. She needed to be corrected. It was time our family quit being punished by her unpredictable moods and her annoyance with everyone and everything around her.

I loved her dearly, but I had to admit it: Bethany could be a real snot sometimes. Her older sister and younger brother were always complaining about her attitudes and selfishness, and on more than one occasion, my wife, Paige, had thrown up her hands in frustration and despair, wondering if Bethany would

ever grow up. It didn't take a Ph.D. to figure out that we were giving her way too much latitude. Her schoolwork was starting to suffer, and seemingly overnight she had changed her clothes from a well-groomed "preppy" style to a sloppy, skinny-jeans "skater" look. What was going on with her?

Whatever it was, I assumed it was related to her growing hormonal imbalances, combined with girl-boy teen drama and high school social stress. I also assumed her attitude was a jab at her mother and me, an attempt to show us that she was older and independent now, able to handle herself without our help. So I, the supposedly wise father, was already judging her actions as rebellious and in need of correction before I had talked with her at all. I was seriously right—and I was seriously wrong.

In retrospect, the signs were there, if I had taken the time to notice. If I had been paying attention to Bethany, really paying attention, I would have seen the faint scars from a few old, purple cuts—long, swollen, twisted welts—as well as the chronic scars on the insides of her forearms. But I didn't. I might have noticed that the girl who had once been the most voracious eater in the family was suffering from an ongoing loss of appetite. I might have noticed that her choice of music, art and reading had shifted from bright and uplifting to dark and depressing. She had, in fact, been morphing from an animated and optimistic young woman, full of life, hope and excitement, into a shadow of her healthier self.

In my naiveté, I was still remembering her as she was before instead of seeing her as she had become. I had missed the transformation in front of my very eyes. Actually, I'd seen the symptoms, but I hadn't taken them seriously. Instead of investigating the sudden changes in my daughter, I'd dismissed them, chalking it all up to normal teen issues. Day after hectic day had come and gone, and I was blindly doing my best to keep everything and everyone in their proper places. Hypnotized by the repetitive schedules and demands on my time, I was slowly losing my awareness of the very real and dangerous problem growing in my own home. I had fallen asleep at the wheel.

Not only had Bethany changed in appearance and attitude, but the time she spent alone in her room and away from her family or friends had grown from a few hours each week to a few hours each day. When she was around, her blank and absent stare was devoid of any emotion—beyond her growing irritation with the rest of us. Yet I continued to misread her activities, changes in appearance and nasty attitude. I shudder to think what might have happened that dark week in September 2009 if I hadn't taken a moment to pray with my wife late one night in our bedroom.

Divine Intervention

As I took the time to quiet myself, and as I emptied my mind of the day's worries, I opened my heart in prayer and immediately felt the presence of God intrude into my awareness. It was like a firm, tender, but powerful impression, a deep whisper in my mind: *Ask Bethany what she is hiding from you.* I thought, *Tonight, Lord? Right now?* My heart felt an intense surge of emotion as I sensed the urgency. *Immediately!*

Since committing my life radically to Christ eight years earlier, one thing I had learned is that when God clearly speaks to me, it's wise to respond right away. My wife and I agreed it was important enough to interrupt our sleep that night, and we decided to find out what was really going on with our daughter.

As we walked the short distance from our room to hers, I felt frustration and anger build within me. Obviously Bethany was lying to us about something, and I was determined to find out what. Like many parents, we had battled with the pattern of deceit and half-truths so common in adolescents. I was convinced that Bethany had lied to us once again and was secretly pursuing some defiant violation of our house rules regarding boys or Facebook or texting. She was always pushing the boundaries with us, and this time she must have gone too far. After all, the middle child is often the most difficult—everyone told us so. Bethany had fought her mother

and me every step of the way, ever since she was a little toddler. "I DO IT!" she had screamed at us when she first learned to talk and walk. And in the next decade, it seemed she had continued to resist every effort we made as her parents to win her heart and her trust.

Reality Check

At the door to my daughter's bedroom, I paused and listened. I could hear her quiet sobs and restless movements. I was beginning to grow more concerned and less angry at whatever she had done. I began to feel a darkness—deep pain and despair—coming from her room. It was a palpable sense that something or someone was tormenting my daughter.

I had often felt unprepared and unqualified to raise a daughter, let alone two. I seemed unable to understand their unique emotional needs. Yet I knew for sure that I loved Bethany with all my heart, and I was ready to do anything for her. Like any father, I would take a bullet to the brain or a knife through my heart—whatever it took to protect her. But that night, I sensed something deeper and more terrifying trying to harm my child, something I couldn't touch, fight or repulse.

Whatever this problem was, it threatened to destroy my daughter, and it was time for me to battle for her like I had never done before. I immediately began to pray and to seek the wisdom of my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Rarely do we get to pray for something else as pure and as needed as wisdom in raising our children, and I was exceedingly short and to the point. *Lord, I need some insight here for Bethany. Please, Lord. I'm scared and confused, and I don't know how to help her. Please, God.* And again I sensed the peaceful but firm impression in my mind: *Just ask her to reveal what she has hidden.*

Bethany by now was restlessly moving in her bed; maybe she could sense that someone was at her door. As her mother and I entered and approached her bedside, she moved suddenly as if to hide something. When we turned on the hall light and its

illumination flooded her dark room, we could tell by Bethany's swollen eyes that she had been crying for some time. Embarrassed, she quickly got up and turned her face, trying to wipe away the evidence of her weakness.

My wife and I simply told our daughter that we felt God had revealed to us in prayer that she had been struggling with a profound and painful secret. We assured her that we wanted to help, but to do that we would need her to be completely honest about whatever was going on in her life. As we gently but firmly asked her to reveal what she was hiding from us, it seemed her entire body shuddered with the impact of our words. Instead of denying her actions, she slowly sat down and began to weep into her hands. This was not the reaction she usually had when we confronted her about inappropriate behavior. This was the response of a broken and devastated soul, weary and hopeless and alone.

I remember the sudden and painful tightening in my gut, the nausea in the back of my throat as I listened to my little girl tell me she had been molested—touched inappropriately by a male student in her middle school, the day of her graduation from eighth grade. How could that be? Why didn't she tell us? Dozens of thoughts and questions invaded my mind like a tidal wave. I watched helplessly while my wife erupted into tears and smothered my daughter's little frame with her protective hug.

The nausea inside me quickly grew into numbness. My mind refused to accept what my ears had just heard, and I almost shut down with the emotional shock of her revelation. Not my family! Not my daughter, not in my house! As my fear and shock subsided, my rage surged—rage at whoever had done this, rage at my inability to fix this terrible wound in my Bethany, rage at my own failure to protect her from harm, from violation. I choked as I tried to absorb it all. Why had this happened? What was going on in my own family? And why didn't I have a clue?

Something much worse and much different from a secret boyfriend or an abuse of freedom had occurred. In my haste to

confront and correct, I had missed the other possible explanation for my daughter's progressive changes in attitude, appearance and behavior: despair.

The space between defiance and despair is very small. As a parent, I had yet to learn the difference, and given the history of Bethany's stubborn and persistent personality, I had categorized her in my mind as a "strong-willed child." Long before this terrible night I had judged her incapable of being forthright, truthful or respectful, and so at the apex of her young life, I had rushed to a premature judgment of my daughter's motives long before the facts were revealed. In that moment, I had a parental epiphany: Bethany wasn't acting so strange because of some stereotypical teenage funk; she was acting out of pain. Her world had grown increasingly dark as her heart gave way to despair and shame. She had carefully hidden her pain from us, fearing we would not understand or continue to love her like before.

As a father, that moment broke my heart. I realized in an instant how foolish I had been, how easily I had assumed the worst of my daughter and how legalistically my own religious nature had intruded upon the most fragile of life moments. If I had continued in the path of correction and confrontation that night with my daughter, I believe I might have lost her forever. Instead, by the amazing grace of God alone, I kept myself from launching into another angry tirade at her deception and intuitively was able to grasp that her actions were being caused by her secret, not in an effort to protect it.

Bethany sobbed and rocked back and forth in her chair as she told her mother and me in a rush of words and gasping cries of her attempt to take her own life a day before. She told us how she had been cutting herself, desperate to stop the pain and shame of being molested four months earlier. She begged us to believe her and forgive her and protect her and help her. Her words were like broken glass as they hit my heart, ripping away at my hardened beliefs and deepest fears.

A long night ensued, filled with explanations, choking cries

of despair and shame, and anger at God for letting this happen and at myself for leaving her all alone to figure it out. Anger for the many nights she had cried herself to sleep, only to wake up to the same sense of unrelenting fear and guilt. For victims of molestation and abuse, the irrational feelings of guilt and condemnation are overwhelmingly intense. The fear that somehow they had caused the incident, the anger at being helpless to prevent it, and the deep identity-shattering belief that they deserved it—all this forms an inner core of despair so devastating it often leads them to contemplate taking their own lives, just to end the pain. My daughter, my precious and beautiful child, had been mistreated, abused and then isolated by her fears and my prejudices to a point where she felt her best option was to take her own life rather than confide in us, the ones whose greatest role was to protect, nurture and love her into adulthood.

My shame was well-deserved; hers was not. To say that I felt remorse, regret and guilt at my failure to recognize her condition is a monumental understatement. My heart burned with the pain not only of my daughter but also of my heavenly Father as I realized how little I really knew my own child. How little of a genuine relationship I shared with her. How much I had wrongly assumed about her. The lies I had agreed to believe about her life and her attitudes. I had somehow lost touch with my daughter to such a degree that she couldn't take her greatest crisis to me for help and counsel and comfort. In effect, when she needed me the most, I was no longer there. Paige, too, was heartsick at hearing Bethany describe what had happened. As her mother, Paige had always been there to protect her children and felt grieved to the core that this time, she hadn't. She wanted to reverse time, to go back and protect her daughter from all this suffering.

Such was the shock and surprise at the night's events that I had to step back and consciously calm myself in a moment of prayer and sacred Scripture reading. Accepting my failures, I was determined to learn, grow and improve in my God-given role as Bethany's earthly father. I began the process of rearranging my schedule, my priorities and my life to a substantial degree and began asking God to show me what I could do to help repair the wounds in my daughter and in our

home. Over time, that prayer for healing, wholeness and restoration would be answered in a most unusual way.

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