

When Your Child Hears God's Call

The soap suds rise from the bottom of the tub and cover me like a warm quilt. Oh, if Calgon could really take me away, I'd be curled up on my grandmother's sofa in front of her roaring fireplace as she tucks the corners of one of her tattered-piece quilts around my feet.

But try as I might, I can't get there; I'm still here in my tub, hidden away for just a moment. The water's too hot for a bath, but that's the way I like it.

My eyes are closed, and when I try to open them all I can see is a green light filtered through cucumber slices. So I close them tighter and begin to think about Chera, our 15-year-old daughter—the one who wants to be a missionary.

She knew she wanted to be a missionary when she was 10. I remember the night a drama troupe came to church, and at the end of their program they invited young people who have a heart for missions to come forward so some of the performers could pray with them.

That's when little Chera made a beeline to the front. Our son, Zach, who was only 5, said, "I want to be a missionary, too."

"You do?" I asked.

He nodded. Then as everyone prayed for the future missionaries, he leaned in close to me and asked, "What's a missionary?"

But Chera's always known what a missionary is and what a missionary's job is. My big concern is that she may not be tough enough; her heart's too tender.

I wish I could soak in this tub all day and act as if nothing

is going to change. But it won't work like that. I know because I already tried, and in a blink she went from collecting bugs in the backyard to perusing college catalogs.

There are moments I wish I could freeze—like snapshots—moments when she is innocent and childlike, like the time she got excited to learn that some of her favorite things to eat, such as tomatoes and green beans, grow on plants. At the same time, she was tremendously disappointed to discover that macaroni and cheese doesn't work that way.

At first, I believed her idea to be a missionary was one of those wishes that change with each birthday—you know, like a child wanting to be president of the United States one year and a cashier at 7-11 the next. When she was 5 all she would talk about was getting her own gas station!

When Chera started paying more and more attention to maps and stories of far-off countries in missions magazines, I thought to myself, Thank goodness there is nothing set in stone when you are 10! But five years have passed, and the conversations are still the same.

Chera's room is filled with books written by missionaries living in "the bush," battling (sometimes to the death) disease and sicknesses, irreverence and harassing governments, and hunger. But the harshest of these stories have done nothing to dissuade her.

Lately, she's been getting a lot of mail from universities across the country. She studies the catalogs, flipping past the colorful photos of grinning, laughing students having fun in the student center or couples walking hand-in-hand along sidewalks that meander through an autumn landscape (those PR people are good!) and goes directly to the curriculum sections.

Dreamy-eyed, she studies the Third-World curriculum offered by one institution. "Look, Mom," she says as she points to a

section of small print in the middle of the page. "It's required that you take two semesters of African culture studies. Required! Can you believe it?"

I just nod. I'm trying not to weep as my little girl gets excited about going to a country that's on the other side of the world.

I wonder about Abraham and Isaac. I can imagine how Abraham's heart must have been breaking in two as he prepared to offer his only child—a child so long in coming—up to God.

I take a deep breath, and the quilt of suds starts to sink into the cooling water. No one has banged on the door yet to disturb my solitude with a life-shattering question such as, "Mom, where is the peanut butter?" So I stay put a little longer and try to figure out where in the world 15 years went.

A few months ago, Chera and I went to Guatemala with a group from World Vision. I wanted to guard her heart.

As a child, Chera cried when the circus master locked Pinocchio in a cage. I was sure she'd weep at the degree of poverty and deprivation we would witness.

But she didn't weep. She studied every story, every landscape, every detail; she soaked it all in. She played soccer in the village streets with giggling children all around who were mesmerized by her blonde hair. She touched each child that came near her and sat still while they slowly reached up to touch her strangely colored locks.

She made them all laugh when she called out, "¡Escuchen al pepino!" which means, "Listen to the cucumber!" It was the only Spanish phrase she knew. (Veggie Tales doesn't exactly prepare you for international travel.)

Maybe this fanciful notion of being a missionary will pass now that we've gone out of the country and the romance of the idea

has been stripped away, I thought. At least I thought that until I got an e-mail from Chera not too long after we returned.

It was only a few weeks before her 15th birthday, and she should have been concerned about the party, the invitations, the silly boys at school. But her e-mail was about Mauritania, one of the most desolate countries in all the world.

She did some research on the Internet and discovered that about 2 million people live there, most of them without running water and other utilities. It's only a couple of degrees away from qualifying as a desert. And by the way, it is against the law to be a Christian there.

But there is where she says she wants to go.

What am I supposed to do? I desire nothing less than that she have a happy and loving relationship with God the Father. But how can I keep these crazy notions of trotting the globe to spread the gospel out of her head?

The more dangerous the possibility, the more she seems to like it. She wanted to go to China last summer just so she could smuggle Bibles. Do you know how many Bibles you can hide in a trunk with a false bottom? I do because Chera told me.

As I watch her growing, reading, studying (lying upon that altar), I realize that I can't stop her. "Mother, I can't wait to take them some hope," she said to me, referring to the people of Mauritania.

Sometimes I think it would be much easier to give my child to God if she were a drug addict or an alcoholic. Don't misunderstand me here. I know this dilemma may be different than most parents face with their children.

I rode around the city of San Diego with a pastor's wife on our way to have a Girls' Nite Out event at her church. She

shared with me her incredible story of God's faithfulness and redemption of their son, who had been addicted to drugs and involved in selling drugs.

She said, "You can't imagine what it's like to answer the front door one morning to see an FBI agent standing there, telling you the most frightening stories about your son—the same son that just graduated with honors. All there is to do is to give him to the Lord. It is completely out of your hands at that point."

Out of my hands. That's what frightens me. Sometimes I find myself thinking, If I give her to Him now, He may take her away. That just doesn't seem fair.

The water's no longer cooling—it's cold. Besides, the muffled sound of children's voices are creeping closer to my door, and the sound of a glass tipping over on the coffee table, and my husband, David, stomping past a few times with that slight "huff" that says, "How long are you going to be in there!"

I lift the stopper and start looking for the cucumbers before they can clog the drain (wouldn't want that to happen again). I find one of them stuck to the bar of soap and the other to the side of my Tweety Bird sponge. (Don't ask.)

Once more I think about Mauritania. Maybe Chera will never really go there. Maybe God has merely sent along a catalog so she can familiarize herself with the courses available to would-be missionaries. That's all.

Now, wrapped in my tattered terry cloth robe, I dry my hair and pray that Chera learns all she needs to know to survive in a place like Mauritania. She knows that God is real, that He loves her and that He will guide her steps.

I wish she would stay with me always. But I know that in her heart there rests a desire to see more children laughing like those in Guatemala. (Why did I ever take her?)

“Do you know how many people immigrate to Mauritania every year?” she asked me one day shortly after she sent me the e-mail. Then, without waiting for an answer from me, she answered herself: “Zero.”

Then she added, “You know, they speak French there.” (She’s taking French in high school. She loves to point out God’s hand at work.) “It’s dry and dusty, and they farm for a living. It’s perfect.”

Farm? I think, remembering Chera’s experience with farming. I turn off the blow dryer and continue my long conversation with God.

Suddenly, a swelling sense of peace that she’s going to be all right covers me. It is His presence I sense, His voice I hear as He reminds me that He is God.

While I brush through my hair I hear Him gently say, “She’ll be OK, Chonda. I will be watching her every move. And besides, she knows now that you can’t grow macaroni and cheese.”

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