

Summer, 2011

To the many who have cared,

**“*Human being* is more a verb than a noun. Each of us is unfinished, a work in progress. ... If life is a process, all judgments are provisional. No one has won or lost until the race is over. ... *Broken* may be only a stage in a process. *A bud is not a broken rose*. Only lifeless things are broken. Perhaps the unique process which is human is never over. ... Without impermanence, there is no process. The nature of life is change. Hope is based on process.” Rachel Naomi Remen, M.D.**

In my younger days, the thought of parenting children held little appeal for me. I was independent and securely employed as a pastry chef at a prestigious Boston area country club. It was work that brought me respect and gave me enjoyment. I earned a comfortable living, and as I was never consumed with material wealth, my work enabled me to provide for all of my needs, leaving me to conclude that I lacked for nothing. I enjoyed my freedom and carefree ways, and was quick to boast that an unattached life suited me well.

Decades' worth of further experience and the wisdom and perspective that life provides over time has left me with a different take on my youth. Looking back I now see that, like many males who are not yet fully prepared to come of age and assume their place in caring for the world, I was adverse to commitment. The thought of making choices and standing by them seemed to narrow my options in ways that made me squirm; the prospect of being responsible for other lives over an extended period of time clashed with my tendency to be rather self absorbed. And self absorption turns our focus inward, restricting vision while blocking our ability to get a clear look at life as it plays itself out just beyond our own immediate and narrow world. As such, I largely lacked the ability to imagine the benefits and joy that come with caring for others as one cares for oneself.

If 25 years ago someone would have predicted that one day I would willingly choose to assume responsibility for the well being of other lives, I would have smiled and confidently asserted, “It isn't likely.” But God had other plans for me and just before my 36<sup>th</sup> birthday called me to work in Guatemala, while in the process asking me to make lasting and profound changes, against my apparent will. For I can be head strong, and at the time was especially adverse to anyone telling me what I should or should not do. Therefore, it was much to my surprise that I did not resist in the least, and readily assented to follow the new path that had been mapped out for me, despite the fact that I had no idea where it would lead. As young and headstrong as I was, I understood that it made little sense to wrestle with God. It was clear that if I chose not to work with Him, I would only succeed in making a mess of my life. I have long believed meaning and satisfaction, not to mention lasting peace, can best be found through working to fulfill our life's purpose.

I've now spent 17 years toiling at, what I have come to conclude, is my life's work. By most standards that is a considerable amount of time to dedicate to the pursuit of a dream or mission. It is all but impossible to work at something for so long without having it leave its mark on who you are and what defines you. I have changed in many ways, some of which I will never fully understand. But even so, I've little doubt that almost without exception they have been changes for the better, as they have left me a wiser and more caring man. I've also become a more capable person, as the demands of managing Only A Child are numerous, so much so that I've come to see myself as a jack-of-all-trades.

One might therefore conclude that it would be difficult to single out one of my responsibilities and label it as *the most important thing that I do*. But the choice is an easy one. Caring for our young men, guiding them through the process of growing into adulthood has long been the most rewarding aspect of this work. And although the challenge of trying to be a father figure to our youngsters can be daunting, it is also one that I welcome and take seriously. Every day, at any given moment, I strive to give our youngsters the best example I can muster, as to what it means to be a good and honorable man. Being that my Christian faith defines and guides me more than anything else, the example I draw from is the life of Jesus. I've found it's never let me down.

As anyone who has ever parented or mentored a life still immersed in the *process of becoming* knows, the demands of such work are many and, at times, unrelenting. Still, the rewards more than offset the demands and I've found that it is the work that gives my life direction and a sense of satisfaction.

Raising youngsters who, to varying degrees, have grown up on the street comes with its own specific trials. Most of us have been raised in homes that, although they were not perfect, were by most standards satisfactory. We entered into adulthood reasonably well prepared to take our place in the world and function as capable beings. Our youngster's upbringing, however, was anything but traditional. There was no one consistently present in any significant way to guide and watch over them. The streets were their primary teachers and the lessons learned there did not prepare them in any useful way to enter into adulthood, leaving them years behind in their development. Therefore when they come to Only A Child, looking to rebuild their lives, they've much to overcome. There's a lot of catching up to do. The skills and abilities that most of us learned as children and largely take for granted are, for the most part, foreign to our youngsters. They must learn them as adults. It is not always easy.

It goes without saying that the work can be difficult at times, both for our youngsters and for me. But I have come to believe that such is life. Growth is seldom easy, at times testing us for all we are worth. We are all in process, some further along than others, each of us learning different lessons at different times. Yet somehow it's alright. In fact, perhaps that's how it's meant to be. We are all unique. Each of us is here to contribute to and shape the world in ways that are solely ours. It only makes sense that our preparation and travels through life would be unlike another. ***A bud is not a broken rose.*** And a bloom opens itself to the world in its own time.

Many of our youngsters stay in touch with me after they have left our program. They share the stories of their lives post Only A Child, not only the successes but the struggles and setbacks, as well. It is not unusual for them to seek my counsel when faced with an unusually difficult situation.

I find such conversations rewarding, for even in their struggles - perhaps never more so than during their struggles - do they show that they are coping, and like the rest of us simply trying to do their best. As such, they have become our peers, and have taken their place by our sides in life's never ending march forward.

Life, by its very nature, is not idle or inert. It must always be in motion, moving in one direction or another. For the absence of life is death. And life demands of us that we take a stand and enter the game. The game is never played on the sidelines. Throughout our lives we are required to make choices, than stand behind the decisions we have made and own whatever consequences they may bring. We have all made choices that we have come to regret. Often times we must live with them, but occasionally we are given the opportunity to respond differently. Many years ago, I balked at the prospect of watching over other lives. Then unexpectedly, some time later, I was given the opportunity to change my mind. Not unlike our youngsters, I was handed a second chance to live my life in a different way. It has proven to be a genuine blessing, and for that I am daily and eternally grateful.

I'd like to share a brief letter with you. It was sent to me last year, just before Father's Day. The letter was written by one of our program's graduates, whose name is Augusto:

**Dear George,**

**I am writing briefly just to wish you a Happy Father's Day, because although you have no proper children, you have been like a father for many. Especially so for me, for the many things that you taught me I can now apply to my daily life. You always counseled me when I needed it and scolded me when I deserved it. Truthfully George I'm grateful to you because every day when I talk with Betty (Augusto's wife), I say that you believed in me and gave me the opportunity to be someone and now I am the person I am, and have a good job and an excellent family. I know that I've told you before, but you are the closest thing I have ever had to a father. May God bless you and thank you for all of your support.**

**Augusto**

There's nothing more to be said other than thank you. You have cared about our youngsters and as a result, helped to look after them. You have believed in each of them and supported all of them through the process of meaningful and lasting change, giving every one of them, a second chance at life. May God bless.

Sincerely,

George