

January 8, 2012 Sarah MacLaughlin Thriving Parent=Thriving Community

It's great to be back at this church. My parents Kathi and Kevin Pewitt have been members of this congregation for a number of years. I have always found it to feel very comfortable here. I guess that's why they call it a sanctuary

A home is supposed to be a sanctuary too—a sanctuary for families and our youngest and most vulnerable community members—children. I'm a social worker by trade and my primary job is in foster care. I can tell you that for many, home is no sanctuary. For some, home is an adrenaline-inducing nightmare, a horror show, a war zone. It's shocking how bad things must be for a child to be removed from their parents. Abuse or neglect must be reported more than once. The problem needs to be substantiated. A judge has to make the call. I understand that a balance must be struck. Misunderstandings happen, and taking a child from her home should not be taken lightly. However, our system is imperfect to say the least—and things fall through the cracks. Sometimes the cracks are so large that actual people fall through.

When I was about 21, one of my best friend's mother died. One of her young sisters was home at the time. We were not surprised. Her mother, an active alcoholic and drug user, had been spiraling downward for months. We had made multiple calls to the state for help. Reported her when we found her passed out at home or heard she had been driving while under the influence. My friend had volunteered to take custody of her two young sisters. We'd diligently dropped by their apartment unannounced. We searched for bottles of vodka and dumped them down the sink. We had wanted to help. We wanted to protect the girls. Instead, the youngest was the one to find her mother: dead in a chair. It had not been the worst fate we could imagine, but it was traumatic enough. Something an eight-year-old will likely never forget.

I'm sure this experience was among many that informed my career choices. Understanding children, supporting parents, helping families—this has always seemed like the most important work to me. Doesn't it make sense to invest our time, attention and money in *preventing* problems at home?

Sometimes I say that foster care is like putting a Band-Aid on an amputation. It's a pretty frightening metaphor, but often it feels like if only the initial infection had been fought hard and well from the start, things wouldn't have snowballed. It is so easy to judge, or to say, "that could never happen to me." But often parents are left with nowhere to turn. Recently, in the state of Texas, a mother committed a horrible act against her own kids and then herself at a state welfare office. Even with these most abhorrent of cases, I have to wonder:

What if this mother had had better support? If she had started her journey as a mother with paid parental leave, instead of nothing, or the paltry twelve weeks of unpaid time she was entitled to if she had a full-time benefitted job? In some states she might have been eligible for some paid weeks under an insurance claim. New mothers must declare themselves "disabled" in order to have any compensated time with their precious new babies. If only we put our scientific knowledge about human brains into practice and policy! Babies' brains develop well as a result of their interactions with the grown-ups in their lives. Doesn't it make sense to reduce the stress and worry of those grown-ups as much as possible?

In the U.S. we treat parenting like a hobby. I can hear our society saying: “*Oh, you decided to have kids? That’s great, good luck with that. Once you get through the toughest and most demanding first five years of your child’s life—the portion where they are most emotionally volatile, least rational, and constantly needy—you know, that part where your kid’s brain gets initially wired based on the quality of their connection with you? Yeah, after that we’ll provide you with a federally-funded education. But only for part of the day. And only for nine months out of the year. For all the rest of it, you’re on your own. After all, it was your choice to have kids.*”

It is easy to argue that when parents truly fail this impacts the community. Since as a culture we don’t invest much up-front in the lives of children (aside from that great schooling I just mentioned), our tax dollars are needed *after the fact*, after the amputation: as a Band-aid for in-home support or out-of-home placement; for treatment and education. But even for parents for whom things are not-so-bad, things are not great. People are struggling. Moms are worried. Dads are tired.

I know that previous generations raised kids, and raised them well, within our current capitalist system and with little support. But our system is ever-shifting, economies ever-changing—the middle-class is ever-shrinking. It is now less common for a parent to be home full-time for *any* length of time, let alone until Kindergarten. Living is often too expensive for someone to not be working. Parents are doing too much, I should know, I’m one of them. I’m parenting in a paradigm shift. We are (hopefully) moving from an individualistic viewpoint that holds financial success and material wealth in the highest regard, to a community-minded view that reveres cooperation and emotionally honest problem-solving.

And because it is always true that the personal is political, and vice-versa, change can begin at home. Genevieve Simperingham who has a website beautifully entitled: *The Way of the Peaceful Parent* writes about a paradigm shift in parenting. She notes:

“Children respond to conflicts in the only ways that they are familiar with, in the same ways that conflicts are responded to at home. Your children will respond to conflicts with themselves, with you, with siblings, and with their friends in the same ways that they’ve seen modeled in their primary relationships.”

When we think that a child has done something wrong and must be punished, given a consequence, or taught a lesson, we see them through the lens of being naughty and untrustworthy. Genevieve states, “The child is given the message that a consequence is being set because this is what 'needs' to happen in loving relationships, this is all part of the responsibility of a loving parent (or friend), this is what "love" looks like and this is how we learn to be a better person.” We believe that we must TEACH them, through unpleasant experiences, or losing something they desire, how to behave well. But this is faulty thinking because children ALWAYS learn from example. They learn by watching us: what *we* do and what *we* say. We don’t need to always *instruct* them how to behave, because we are always *showing* them with our own behavior.

The Way of the Peaceful Parent also suggests: “we approach a problem from the perspective that we have a conflict because one or more people are upset. From this place we trust a child’s inherent goodness and also trust that through honest, authentic, but sensitive sharing of how each

person feels, difficulties can be resolved. We all need to talk to better understand each other, we need to take turns listening to each other, misunderstandings need to be uncovered. We need to sort it out together.”

So for me—a working-mama-who-does-too-much—parenting in a paradigm shift can be confusing and disorienting. I want to be connected, mindful, and oriented toward cooperative problem-solving. I want to avoid punishment and being punitive. I want to teach through calm, loving, peaceful example. And this does happen much of the time. But because I still, by nature of my place in this shift, have one foot in the old paradigm, I am ever- mindful of the old story too.

It plays out like this: My darling son is having a melt-down. We are out of the snack he wanted. I have twelve other snacks available. But he is bereft, miserable, screaming about the one that is not. He is adamant in his lack of logic: “I am hungry and really want a snack but I don’t want any of those snacks, I only want that OTHER snack and we don’t have it so I’m not hungry but I’m hungry.” My “new-paradigm thinking” says: “He is tired. His emotional upheaval is not about the snack. He is saying nonsensical things. Stay with him. Be close. Be empathetic. Stay warm. Allow him to offload his strong feelings. He needs to know you love him when he is acting his most obnoxious.”

And even as I may succeed at doing all of that, I still hear the “old paradigm thinking” loud and clear: “Are you kidding me? Eat the darn snack! Some children don’t *even have* snacks. I shouldn’t have to listen to this ridiculous wailing. He’s not even making any sense. Crazy kid. I should just leave him by himself until he can pull it together.” You see, even when I truly, with my whole heart believe in what I am doing, believe that it is right, and know that it will work and pave the way for a better future. I still hear the old junk. It chips away at my confidence. It casts doubt. And then, if you place this scenario in public, the small doubt grows to huge judgment and I worry that others will be thinking to themselves, or even worse as it happens, voicing it aloud: “What a brat. In my day, children didn’t behave that way. You shouldn’t let him get away with that.” And on and on with the things that I don’t believe, but still hear.

And so I imagine that someday children will be honored and parents will be supported. No one will be labeling behavior “bad,” or insisting that children be “taught a lesson.” Parental leave will be standard, parenting education plentiful. Lack of resources for families will not be tolerated. I envision two people talking: “Remember when people didn’t respect children or realize they need to be listened to? Remember spanking and time-outs? Remember when people had to go back to work when their children were babies?—Wasn’t that insane?”

I remain hopeful because educated people once believed the Earth was flat.