

# SACRED GIFTS

Extraordinary Lessons from My Ordinary Teens

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*To my children,  
who gave me a song to sing.*

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# PREFACE

Writing a book is a journey of sorts and is best undertaken with good guides, maps, and traveling companions. I was blessed with all these.

Leif Kehrwald was my guide and editor. A man of infinite patience, he gave me confidence to begin the journey and firm direction along the way.

Freddie Leonard is a woman who sits at the feet of God and keeps those of us fortunate enough to be her friends there with her. Her continuing prayer gave me light in the dark stretches; her encouragement gave me a second wind.

B. J. Levad is an extraordinary friend and advisor. She read and reread this manuscript with insight and wisdom. She made me walk through when I wanted to take a detour.

Vince Brennan, my husband of thirty-nine years, is a constant friend and companion. He guided, read, edited, encouraged, and advised. And he even cleaned the kitchen. He is the “can” to my “can’t.”

Patrick Michael, Laurie Christine, Matthew Kircher, Timothy Sean, Kevin Corcoran, Christopher Vincent, and Ryan Peter are my children, who graciously allowed me to share their travails and triumphs.

I thank them one and all.

*Tina Brennan*

The most sublime psalm that can be heard on this earth  
is the lisping of a human soul  
from the lips of childhood.

—Victor Hugo, *Ninety-Three*

## INTRODUCTION

As parents, we have been counseled in book and lecture to watch for those epiphanies called “teachable moments.” We are always on the lookout, waiting for an opening to firmly implant a life lesson, after which we can smugly sit back with a satisfying “Ah, wasn’t that perfect, the way it all came together?” There are, indeed, some very special moments, and they need to be appreciated and applauded. But as the years roll on, I am realizing that I am the one who is the beneficiary of the gift of the “teachable moment.” My unsuspecting instructors? Seven marvelous children and their various and multifaceted friends.

Now, this is not earth-shattering news—that we learn all kinds of stuff at the feet of our offspring. What surprised me were the ages of the kids who gave me the most significant lessons—lessons that stretched me, challenged me, and sometimes made me take a step back and change my firmly set course. These cherubs-urchins were usually between the ages of thirteen and sixteen, and more often than not, they were *fourteen*—that marvelous, dreadful moment in time when they are floundering and flapping around, feeling useless, clumsy, and for the most part incapable of any worthy contribution to society. For some unknown reason, this is the time that they bless us abundantly. All we need are an open mind and a teachable spirit.

Looking back at my own adolescence, I don’t remember having anywhere near the level of compassion, selflessness, and

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just plain goodness that I have witnessed in my children and their friends. Was I that brave, that confused, that stubborn, that noble, and that weak? I must have been. Was I the unwitting teenage guru for my parents and other adults who brushed my life or came to stay for awhile? Did I open the doors for them into direction, clarity, and understanding while I was feeling lost, foggy, and ignorant? I hope so. But if the truth were known, I don't recall having any impact on anyone or anything around me.

Maybe that is one of the gifts of this age. At fourteen, we are given an hour of humility to stumble along, living and loving in a powerful way, unaware of our effect on the people we consider the rulers of our universe.

I see these opportunities for growth, realization, and sacred insight as gifts of grace—a time and place of vulnerability made possible through age or circumstance. Our job, as parents and adults in young people's lives, is to pay attention, to smack our foreheads and say to ourselves, "Of course, you idiot!" The result is awesome.

This is not a book or a manual on how to guide or how to survive teenagers. It is a book of appreciation for the leg up that they give us on our journey. These are my stories and my gifts, opened through the experiences of my teenagers. (Note: At their request, I have given fictitious names to my children and their friends.) Each family has its own lessons to learn, its own gifts to open. My hope is that the gifts of wisdom offered by these fragile creators of chaos will be treasured and used to bring the kingdom to earth.

These are not once-in-a-lifetime gifts but gifts for a lifetime, to be opened again and again. At the end of each chapter are little ribbons of reflection to help us untie these blessings of life, bits at a time.

## THE GIFT OF FORGIVENESS

(Putting the Horse and Cart in Order)

It is a Sunday afternoon in February, our world is in nap-and-regroup mode. The telephone shatters our nap and puts our regroup into high gear. My husband answers the phone. A shadow falls slowly across his face, and he quietly says: "Yes. Yes, of course, bring him home." He replaces the receiver and slowly turns to me and says: "The police are bringing Michael home. He was shoplifting at the convenience store."

I can't get the words he is speaking and the image of this child to fit in the same corner of my mind. How can this be? There must be a mistake. Of our seven children, Michael is the most obedient, the rule keeper, the junior high "student of the month," the team player, the one who makes sure the kitchen is spotless on his dish rotation. What happened? What did we miss?

My husband and I sit frozen at the table in the breakfast room, waiting. Finally, they come. The police car slides in next to the curb. The officer opens the back door, and out climbs the fourteen-year-old "criminal," hauling his bike behind him.

I cringe in humiliation as pride rears its ugly head even in the midst of this crisis. The neighbors, they'll see the police car. Can't he just go around to the other side of the house? After all, we are a *good family*, models of righteousness in the community. We have a reputation to protect; we can't let the world see anything amiss in the Brennan house.

Michael, jaws set and eyes unreadable, comes through the door. Behind him is the police officer, who looks almost as bewildered as we do.

**Temptation is difficult for anyone, but a hormone-saturated fourteen-year-old is flat-out vulnerable.**

After awkward introductions, we sit down at the breakfast table. The sad tale unfolds: Michael and two of his friends had been in the convenience store on this boring Sunday afternoon, getting a soda and looking at magazines. The store manager saw Michael put a *Playboy* magazine under his jacket and attempt to leave without paying for it. The officer later said company corporate policy required the manager to call the police and press charges.

After the officer arrived at the store, he interrogated Michael. He asked Michael whether his friends had urged him to pick up the magazine. Michael firmly denied any complicity by the other guys; he alone had stolen the magazine. No, he didn't know why he had done it. Of course, it doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure out the "why." Temptation is difficult for anyone, but a hormone-saturated fourteen-year-old is flat-out vulnerable. Add the fact that he had only enough money for a soda, and on top of that, if money was not a problem, pornography laws would have put a quick stop to the purchase. End of deal—enter the snake. What a mess!

The police officer tells us that the store manager is sympathetic, but his hands are tied by company policy: they press charges against all shoplifters, regardless of age or circumstance. We agree that this is as it should be, but what do we do now? The kind officer explains that we will be contacted by a case manager from juvenile hall (Oh, great!) and will be scheduled for an appointment. The powers that be will lay out the

consequences. I cringe at the thought of Michael going to that scary place. And as I watch the freckles pale on his face, I know the same thought is running through his mind.

After getting all the pertinent information down and telling Michael that he is in the middle of a very hard life lesson, the officer leaves through the door that closes behind him with a big sigh. The offending car with POLICE emblazoned on the side pulls away from the curb. I am sure that I see curtains move in the neighborhood—such is my prideful paranoia.

The officer's exit leaves a void. In a way he was a shield, a surface protection that outsiders often provide in an emotional situation. Before Michael and the officer arrived, we had sent the other children to the basement family room. They were still there waiting and wondering what was going on upstairs. They would have to wait awhile longer; we had some serious sorting to do.

Now that it is just the three of us, Michael's shoulders stiffen, and if possible, his jaws tighten even more as he readies himself for the onslaught. What happens next is pure grace, a gift of the most high God. Together, my husband and I put our arms around Michael and tell him we love him. No matter what he has done, or what happens as a result, we love him. That does it—the jaws soften, the shoulders slump, and the dam bursts. Between sobs, Michael pours out a tale of repentance. He is so sorry that he has let us down, that he has embarrassed the family. He doesn't know what possessed him to do such a thing, and he will do anything to make up for the incident. Most important, he loves us. Loving heals the lover and the loved.

In that moment, and in the ensuing weeks, I remained wrapped in awe at the power of forgiveness, this great key that

**For some reason, I always had the cart before the horse—repent and be forgiven.**

opened the door to healing. For some reason, I always had the cart before the horse—repent and be forgiven. What was the matter with me? How had I missed the truth? As is usual when

the Lord is kindly directing a life lesson, everything fell into place: My morning Scripture readings all recounted how “God proves his love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us” (Rom. 5:8).

This lesson gets repeated again and again, and I am always happy to receive it. Just last week, I was reading “The Divine Pickpocket,” an excerpt from Richard Rohr’s *Days of Renewal*, and the whole incident took on flesh once more. Rohr writes:

We can only dare to let go of evil in the presence of perfect love. . . . When God’s arms are tight enough around you, when for a moment you can believe in love, when you let God gaze into your eyes deeply enough and are ready to believe it, then you’re able to let God rob you of your sin. God pulls it out of your pocket while holding you in her gaze!

That Sunday afternoon, after we three had dried our tears, we sat at the table once again and took a hard look at what had to be done. First, Michael had to return to the scene of the crime and apologize. When he heard this, his face turned ashen. “It will be too hard,” he protested. “The man probably hates me. He’ll yell at me in front of everybody. Please don’t make me do this!”

“You must do it,” we told him, “and right away.”

We watched as he walked down the street, his slight but well-muscled body tense with apprehension. Oddly enough,

now that I think about it, the thought never occurred to us that he wouldn’t go. Such was his integrity.

His step was much lighter on the way back. (We had been peering through the window awaiting his return.) His arms swung loosely by his sides, and he was looking around instead of down at the ground.

It had gone well. The store manager was overwhelmed that Michael had come back to apologize. He told Michael that he was sorry he had to press charges and that Michael was always welcome in his store. Store manager and shoplifter were rewarded in the encounter.

But it was far from over. Juvenile hall was a rude awakening. My heart broke as we walked past “hardened criminals” of fourteen and fifteen who had not experienced the gift of forgiveness and who held their sorrow and repentance locked behind cold, wary eyes. Would no one give them the grace of tears?

The juvenile officer was firm and just. When he asked Michael what kind of punishment he felt was in order, Michael responded that he would prefer public service to jail. Trying to contain a smile, the officer told Mike he thought that he had been punished enough. He would have to check in one more time, and if he kept his nose clean, his record would be sealed and then destroyed when he turned eighteen.

End of case but unending lesson: Haven’t we too been promised that “as far as the east is from the west, so far have our sins been removed from us” (Psalm 103:12)?

I face the forgiveness-repentance dilemma at least twice a month, in some form or fashion. Do I always respond with the horse of forgiveness in front and the cart of repentance behind?

**Do I always respond with the horse of forgiveness in front and the cart of repentance behind?**

Unfortunately, no. But occasionally I do, and the results are holy indeed, because I had a fourteen-year-old to teach me forgiveness.

## OPENING THE GIFT

Now let's untie the ribbons of this wonderful gift:

- Does forgiveness or repentance come first in my life?
- Do I remember to forgive myself so that the grace of God can shine forth?
- Are there opportunities for me to extend the grace of forgiveness to those whose sin is locked away?

Forgiving Father, keeper of the key of forgiveness, give us the willingness to use that key, to heal the hearts of those whose true repentance is locked behind the door of sin. Your Son, the Holy One, the Lamb of God, showed us again and again the way to forgiveness until the final forgiving on the cross. Help us to hold one another tightly and pick the sin from the pockets of our brothers and sisters as we allow your love and light to shine from our eyes.