

“I’m Afraid of the Sky Ghost!”

Realizing the Truth About Safe Places

The name of the LORD is a strong tower; the righteous run to it and are safe.

—PROVERBS 18:10

Unsafe again. A chill tickled my six-year-old spine as I spied the sky ghost. He illuminated the rectangle of darkened sky I viewed through the picture window of our small home. Circling, the ghost seemed to be watching me. As he searched the horizon, I felt sure he would light on me. Maybe he would kill me.

Alone in the living room, I had nobody to shelter me from the sky ghost, other than two cats and a stuffed kangaroo. The hardwood floor chilled my skinny feet as I worried behind the drapes. I peeked at the sky through parted fingers, wishing my mom and stepdad would come into the room and protect me from the ghost’s swooping tentacles.

But they didn’t.

Frozen, I watched for the Datsun sedan to pull up outside, come to a squeaky halt, and deliver someone who could comfort me. I fantasized about Tarzan parents who would swing in and rescue me at just the right moment. Problem was, my parents weren’t in the business of rescuing me from my fears or offering sky-ghost explanations.

The sky ghost circled back around, looking for me. As I crouched lower behind the curtains and closed my fingers around my eyes, I remembered the ghost stories my parents’ marijuana-smoking buddies told during hazy parties. Although I’m sure they weren’t telling the stories to scare me, they spun chilling yarns about the haunted house I lived in.

“There’s a ghost in your attic.” A man whose face I can’t recall exhaled sweet-smelling smoke and pulled me closer. “If you listen real good, you can hear her chair creak as it rocks back and forth—right above your bedroom light fixture—usually around midnight. You have to listen close, though.”

I swallowed hard and nodded.

During another party, another person warned me about the cabinet ghost, a specter whose secret delight was opening and shutting kitchen cabinets while I slept. “When you wake up, do you ever notice open cabinets?”

I nodded.

“There’s the proof right there.”

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Another time, someone flung back our fraying oriental rug, revealing a brownish stain on the hardwood floor the size of a large dog. “See?” he said. “Someone was murdered here. This is a blood stain.”

Standing on that same floor, I ducked away from the sky ghost. Then I ran past the kitchen’s opened cabinets for the comfort of my room. Instead of finding refuge, I looked at the light fixture, sure the attic ghost would rattle it above my head. I dove into bed and prayed that the sky ghost wouldn’t find me under my covers.

That night something as benign as a searchlight announcing Big Bob’s Car-O-Rama Blowout Sale became a haunting reminder that the world was a scary place, and that I, a spooked six-year-old, had to face it alone.

The story has been told of a young boy whose mother tucked him into bed at the onset of a storm and left the room to attend to her evening chores. When the crash of thunder shook the house and lightning flashed across the sky, the worried mother returned to her son’s room to make sure he was okay. She found him standing in front of the window with a big grin on his face as the lightning flickered on his face.

“Son,” his mother asked, “why are you smiling? Aren’t you scared?”

“No, Mom! Isn’t it great? God just took my picture!”

That’s the difference between growing up in a safe home and an unsafe one: The child who feels safe approaches a storm, smiling for God’s camera, while the child who doesn’t feel safe cowers alone, hiding from sky ghosts.

Most parents want to create an environment where their children feel safe. Yet you may have grown up in a place where fear reigned. Or perhaps it was rage. Or violence. Or an obsession with body fat. We all come from dysfunctional families, because all families are made up of sinners. But there are degrees of dysfunction, and chances are you or someone you love grew up in a threatening environment. You may be haunted by the fear that you will parent your children the way you were parented.

My sincere prayer is that the principles in this book, along with the power of the Holy Spirit, will help you establish a safe place for your children to smile for God’s camera.

THE ONE SAFE PLACE

To pioneer a safe, loving place for our children, we need to realize that outside of our relationship with Jesus Christ, there is no safe place. This world is racked with terrorism, child abductions, drug abuse, suicide, and a host of other malevolent forces. Jesus said, “In the world you have tribulation, but take courage; I have overcome the world” (John 16:33, NASB). If you grew up in a home that didn’t emulate Christian ideals or love, chances are you did not grow up in a safe place.

My friend Jack remembers being four years old when his mother gripped his small shoulders and shook him violently while screaming, “Do you hear me?” When he was older and not as easy to shake, she’d pin him against the wall and slap both sides of his face.

Jack also remembers his feelings of helplessness on a rare visit to his father. “I was twelve then. Everyone, including my dad, was smoking pot. All I could do was ride my bike to the lake and cry—alone. It got to be that withdrawing or running away became my response. If I ever approached my mom about anything troubling, she responded with such hostility that I learned not to approach her at all. I stayed by myself.” Jack came to understand that if he was going to be safe, he’d have to take care of himself.

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Jack's example is extreme, but even the families whose Olan Mills portraits exude normalcy are flawed. We all share Adam and Eve's lineage of sin. Hopefully, we've realized by now that the only safe place isn't a location but a Person: Jesus. The psalmist acknowledged that the only true refuge from our earthly fears is found in God's strong arms. "I will lie down and sleep in peace, for you alone, O LORD, make me dwell in safety" (Psalm 4:8).

My own longing for Jesus, a Companion who would never leave me, fueled a lifelong quest. Growing up, I heard God's name spoken in profanity. Still, I hunted for him in that unsafe place called home. I prayed to him when I was afraid. But still, I was not safe.

Not having a safe place grew a weed of insecurity in my heart, and the tendrils still wrap around my heart today. Growing up in an unprotected environment, I seldom felt taken care of. But when older boys ripped away my five-year-old innocence, I realized that I alone had to take care of myself. When burglars vandalized our house, in my fear I did not feel safe.

The result of this neglect was twofold. It gave me a passionate desire to love my own children fiercely, but it also made me worry that I would repeat my parents' mistakes. Would my children feel as unsafe as I did when I was a girl? That worry still haunts me today.

Although it is naive to think we can provide an entirely safe place for our children, it *is* possible with God's help to foster a warm, secure parental bond with a child. Not only is it possible, but it's essential. Our children's first task is attaching to a person who will (hopefully) protect them.

Many pioneer parents didn't form such an attachment with their own parents, so they are unfamiliar with the safety that comes from a parent's love. We may instinctively know what a safe place does *not* look like, but because of our negative experiences, it is difficult to picture what a safe place *does* look like. We need to understand the meaning and characteristics of safe places—both for our own benefit and for the health of our children. With that in mind, consider the following characteristics:

1. *A safe place is a refuge.* Just as a wildlife refuge protects animals from bullets and arrows, a safe home protects a child from life's barbs. It's a place where a child can fall apart and not fear judgment. Last year our daughter Sophie was coming undone the moment she stepped off the school bus. For a while I worried about this, questioning what was happening at school to churn up so many emotions. Besides concluding that fifth-grade hormonal changes had a role in this, I realized that my daughter was falling apart because she could. We have succeeded, at least on some level, in creating a safe environment where she's free to express her emotions.

When I was a junior-high teacher, I noticed an interesting dynamic in two types of students. When I met the parents of some students who were out of control at school, the parents were often surprised to hear about their child's outbursts. They'd say something like, "Well, she isn't that way at home," and then they'd look at me as if I were Mephistopheles in the flesh for suggesting such a thing.

Sometimes, when I met with the parents of an I'll-do-anything-for-an-A student, they'd raise their eyebrows and say, "He certainly doesn't act that way at home. He's been climbing the walls." The kids who worked diligently at school, who did extra credit to get an A-plus, seemed to have the freedom to fall apart at home, to let down after a day of school stress.

My unscientific proposition is this: Safe homes allow children to fall apart; unsafe homes don't. The truth is, we all fall apart, and God designed the family as a holy refuge—a place where both acne *and* anger can erupt. It doesn't mean a family is a place to take license;

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instead, it's a safe place where love overlooks the acne of character and enables a child to work through anger.

2. *A safe place is a demonstration of god's parenting skills.* We are representatives of God to our children. Whether we grew up in a stable or a chaotic home, our task is to uncover the true characteristics of God that our parents' sinful natures marred. God is not the same as our earthly parents, even the good ones. As our heavenly Parent, he is not critical, condemning, injurious, aloof, or neglectful. Even the best parents fall short of demonstrating God's perfect, unconditional love. And so will we.

But we can grow in godliness as we raise our children. Part of successful pioneer parenting is unlearning old patterns, pressing into God's warm embrace and parental heart, and learning his ways. Why look back? Why try to understand our family of origin? Isn't the old swept away with the dawning of our new lives in Christ? It's true that, because Christ died for our sins, we have the surprising pleasure of having been justified in God's sight, which means we are utterly accepted by a holy God. Our histories, though, aren't magically removed when we become Christians. In the book *Unclaimed Baggage*, authors Don and Jan Frank expand on this idea. "Forgetting the past in that sense is no mark of spirituality. God neither ignores nor plays down our ruins. If God doesn't ignore, deny, play down, or annihilate our histories, what does he do with them? *He redeems them.*"¹

God is in the redeeming business. He takes our broken pasts, infuses them with his healing, and through the Holy Spirit enables us to forge new parenting paths. The apostle Paul encouraged the Christians living in ancient Ephesus with these words: "God can do anything, you know—far more than you could ever imagine or guess or request in your wildest dreams! He does it not by pushing us around but by working within us, his Spirit deeply and gently within us" (Ephesians 3:20, MSG).

We have the privilege as pioneer parents of demonstrating God's nature to our children, but we cannot do that unless God redeems our broken pasts and parents our kids through us.

3. *A safe place is grace infused.* Because the one truly safe place is in the arms of our heavenly Father, if we as parents are to provide a safe place for our children, we need to demonstrate grace. Jesus modeled this concept when he welcomed the children who clambered onto his grace-filled lap:

Then little children were brought to Jesus for him to place his hands on them and pray for them. But the disciples rebuked those who brought them.

Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these." (Matthew 19:13-14)

My friend Jack, now a parent, wants to create a home of grace. "I want my daughters to know there is nothing they can do to make me *not* love them."

His daughter once asked, "Daddy, will you love me if I hit my sister?"

Jack responded, "Honey, I would be very disappointed if you hit your sister, and I would have to discipline you, but I will *always* love you."

That's a grace-infused home.

4. *A safe place is a place where a child doesn't wonder about love.* A child does not live in a safe place if he or she is constantly wondering, *Do my parents really love me? If I died, would Mommy miss me?* To feel safe, children must know from the top of their tangle-haired heads to the bottom of their toe-jammed toes that their parents love them—no matter what.

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I was a pest as a child. Because I didn't feel that my mother cared about me, I constantly asked, "Do you love me?" I asked for hugs and relished her spontaneous affection. As pioneer parents, it's imperative that we watch for cues from our children. When mine pester me to hug them, I know I am failing to instill a deep knowledge that they are loved. I want my children to wonder wide-eyed at the God who gave them life. I don't want them to wonder whether I love them.

5. *A safe place has clear boundaries and expectations.* A certain school had an unfenced playground. Children, afraid of the nearby street traffic, huddled near the playground equipment during recess and avoided the open field near the street. A smart principal erected a fence around the field, and suddenly the children ran and played freely—right up to the edge of the street. A simple chain-link fence provided a boundary that created freedom and spontaneity inside its protective enclosure.

Parents, because they love their children, will set boundaries by letting them know what is and isn't allowed. If there are no family rules, chaos results—not necessarily overtly, but in the heart of a child. Children who have to determine their own set of rules never really know where they stand with their parents, and they are ill equipped to determine rules in the first place. A child without boundaries growing up will struggle in adulthood to learn to erect appropriate boundaries.

6. *A safe place gives children freedom to fail.* A safe place, however, isn't a straitjacket of rules and regulations. Pioneer parents need not become Pharisaical legalists, doling out so many parameters that they confuse and overwhelm their children. In a safe place, realistic ground rules are set. Children who break those simple rules are disciplined with love. Just as Jesus Christ disciplines us for our own good, so we must discipline our children. But we stop short of barraging them with reminders of their failures. Children will fail to meet our expectations; it's one of life's realities. Dusting our children off, tousling their hair, and lovingly setting them back on their feet helps them learn that failure is a normal part of life.

When we freely admit our failures—even our parenting mistakes—to our children, we create a safe place for our families. We demonstrate the truth that at times we all fail, and we all are in desperate need of God's forgiveness, grace, and empowerment.

Our goal should be to correct our children's behavior while still delighting in their individuality. A stable home provides freedom to fail within the context of grace. For our children to grow up into autonomous adults who revel in their God-given individuality, they must understand the nuances of God's unconditional love. We give them that understanding as we live out unconditional love in our own lives.

YOU ARE A GOOD PARENT

The insecurity I've nursed about providing a safe home for my children is at times a nondescript fear; at other times it strangles me. A few moments stand out to me, little glimpses, really, that help me continue down this pioneering path.

One snapshot is when my friend Heidi came to visit in 1999. At the end of her stay, she held my gaze. "You're a good mother, Mary. Your children know you love them."

Her words salved my fearful heart. Growing up, I felt I was in the way. I worried that I would project that same feeling onto my children. Knowing an outsider saw that my children knew I loved them eased much of my worry.

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Another snapshot. Just two years after Heidi's visit, I was sitting on the love seat in our Texas living room. In the quiet of evening with the kids tucked in bed, the Lord said, "Mary, I want you to say 'I am a good mother' out loud."

"Really?" I asked, without giving voice to my thoughts.

"Yes."

It took me a long time to say the words. I'm not sure why I was so afraid; perhaps I was worried that I would sound self-absorbed or self-important if I spoke them into the air.

"I am a good mother," I whispered.

As soon as I said it, the noose around my heart loosened; I gasped, breathing in free air for the first time in nine years of parenthood. As I look back on those freedom-filled words, I realize that in saying them aloud, I was declaring God's ability to heal me.

God is in the business of gathering hurting people and transforming them into dependent followers of his Son. It is our weakness that *allows* God to do his work. The apostle Paul emphasized this when he said,

Isn't it obvious that God deliberately chose men and women that the culture overlooks and exploits and abuses, chose these "nobodies" to expose the hollow pretensions of the "somebodies"? That makes it quite clear that none of you can get by with blowing your own horn before God. Everything that we have—right thinking and right living, a clean slate and a fresh start—comes from God by way of Jesus Christ. (1 Corinthians 1:27-30, MSG)

Through God's grace, I hope my children will never have to write a book that begins, "I didn't grow up in a safe home."