

Journey to Fulfillment
From Stumbling Blocks to Stepping Stones
By Theresa Franklin

The Building Blocks

Forrest Gump's mother likened life to a box of chocolates. A more appropriate analogy may be life is like a potluck dinner. Everyone brings what they have to the table. No one can be expected to bring something they don't possess. Likewise, parents bring what they have to give to their children. Most everyone has issues with their parents' skills and are careful not to repeat the mistakes. The majority of parents feel pretty smug about their parenting skills until their own children are grown. Although they have no children of their own, in their twenties the offspring begin to share their vast knowledge with the parents, careful to point out each parenting mistake made during their childhood. It is not until the cycle of life is complete that these enlightened ones learn that they made just as many mistakes with their children as did their own parents. Being sixteen and nineteen years of age at the time of my birth, my parents had little to bring to the table.

Their ages alone were enough of a stumbling block. My dad's mother was fond of telling the story of how he rocked me to sleep by moving my cradle back and forth with his foot as he sat reading a comic book. My dad liked to tell the story of my mother getting angry with him and going for a walk. This sounded like a good plan, but she would walk until she was no longer angry and unfortunately too tired to walk back home. She would call the house, and he would go get her. They were typical teenagers trying to survive in an adult world.

My parents were born during the depression and grew up amidst World War II. Both dropped out of school in the tenth grade and both lacked parental guidance as children. They too determined not to make the same mistakes their parents had made. My mother's parents were alcoholics. Research shows that scars last a lifetime for children of alcoholics. Even as adults, children of alcoholics have difficulty trusting others.

Janet G. Woititz, author of *Adult Children of Alcoholics*, writes of thirteen characteristics of adult children of alcoholics:

1. Adult children of alcoholics guess at what normal

behavior is.

2. Adult children of alcoholics have difficulty following a Project through from beginning to end.
3. Adult children of alcoholics lie when it would be just as easy to tell the truth.
4. Adult children of alcoholics judge themselves without mercy.
5. Adult children of alcoholics have difficulty having fun.
6. Adult children of alcoholics take themselves very seriously.
7. Adult children of alcoholics have difficulty with intimate relationships.
8. Adult children of alcoholics overreact to changes over which they have no control.
9. Adult children of alcoholics constantly seek approval and affirmation.
10. Adult children of alcoholics usually feel that they are different from other people.
11. Adult children of alcoholics are super responsible or super irresponsible.
12. Adult children of alcoholics are extremely loyal, even in the face of evidence that the loyalty is undeserved.
13. Adult children of alcoholics are impulsive. They tend to lock themselves into a course of action without giving serious consideration to alternative behaviors or possible consequences. This impulsively leads to confusion, self-loathing and loss of control over their environment. In addition, they spend an excessive amount of energy cleaning up the mess.

My mother possessed twelve of these characteristics. She has recently attended meetings for Adult Children of Alcoholics. With the counseling and literature provided by the organization, she has made progress and works diligently to change her self-destructive behavior. As a child, my mother remembers being sent to the movies on Saturday morning and returning to find broken beer bottles littering the floor. She knew that her parents had been fighting. When she was about seven years old, her dad left the family, and she did not see or hear from him again until she was forty-one years old. At that time, her youngest sister was working evenings as a telephone operator. When she was not busy, she used the time to search for their dad. He had made no effort to get in touch with the family. My grandmother had raised the five children alone during war times. She worked six days a week. On Sunday, she sent the children to church, cleaned the house, and cooked a large dinner. During the week while she worked, the children did chores around the house after school. As a single mother, my grandmother had

little time for reading stories to the children or being involved in their education. It took all her effort just to feed them. Thus my mother and her siblings grew up with little emotional support.

Similarly my father grew up with very little supervision from his parents. His father was employed by the railroad, which required him to work different shifts. His schedule was eight hours on the job, then off for twenty-four hours and this daunting schedule never

waivered. The cycle meant that if he worked during the day on Monday, he worked evenings on Tuesday, and the graveyard shift on Wednesday. He was often working when the children were not in school. My grandfather was considerably older than my grandmother.

The difference in age led to incompatible value systems. Even in today's world, my father's mother would be considered a wild woman. She liked the bars and saw no problem with leaving the children unattended while she visited her hangouts. Stories are told of her being gone for two or three days at a time. My grandfather would care for the children and work his job.

Eventually someone would go by the house and tell him where to find his wife, and he would go get her.

The episodes could have been considered the modern day story of Gomer and Hosea from the Bible.

The work schedule of my dad's father and habits of his mother provided no structure or stability in the home for the children. As a teenager with a wonderful sense of humor but no discipline, my father wreaked havoc in the neighborhood and at school. The old song sang, "Charlie Brown, he's a clown." My dad was the class and neighborhood clown. While very entertaining for the children, it was nerve wracking for the adults, including his teachers. A well-endowed teacher who favored wearing her skirts too tight was one recipient of his blarney. As this teacher wrote on the chalkboard, she bent over at the hips stretching her tight skirt over her shapely behind in front of a classroom of teenage boys. After enjoying the scenery for weeks, my

dad took a handkerchief to class. As she bent over to write at the bottom of the chalkboard, my dad ripped the handkerchief. She quickly stood up, covered her derriere with her hands, and backed out of the class. When she discovered there was nothing wrong with her skirt, she returned to class; and without a word, grabbed my dad by his shirt collar; and dragged him to the principal's office.

My parents provided for us the best way they could considering they had little education. My dad worked selling insurance, driving eighteen-wheelers long distance, driving dump trucks, and delivering milk and soft drinks. He changed careers often. His financial character age was equivalent to a teenager. We could not afford fish to eat, but we could afford tropical fish for his fish tank. We could also afford tropical birds, purebred dogs, and motorcycles. His barely adequate income ability and his desire for expensive toys left our home treading treacherous financial waters. We were constantly in that income bracket too high for assistance and too low to make ends meet. Most of the time, my mother worked to bring extra money into the house. When I was in junior high school, I auditioned for and was accepted as a majorette for our marching band. We practiced during the summer and after school. I was the only one whose mother could not be there to drive them home. At the end of every practice, I had to ask some mother for a ride home. In those days few mothers worked, so most of my friends' mothers were not sympathetic to my need. The following year, I did

not participate in the band because it was too embarrassing to ask for a ride home.

Both of my parents were strict, believing children should be seen and not heard. They bragged that they could take us anywhere and expect perfect behavior. Appropriate behavior was not taught but expected. Many times I was disciplined harshly for doing something that I did not know was wrong. Discipline was a source of power rather than instruction. My mother would say, "Discipline is love." My dad would tell people, "Other parents pay their kids to be good. Ours are good for nothing." Both believed in public discipline for public misconduct. Embarrassment and humiliation were considered appropriate tools of reprimand. My dad would say, "If you embarrass them, they will remember it and not do it again."

I remember sitting in a room full of people as a six year-old and thinking, "They can stop my mouth, but they can't stop my mind." I began to study people, analyzing what they said and did. Extended family gatherings were always a source of conflict. One could count on an argument between brothers, a husband and wife, or mother-in-law and daughter-in-law. At one Christmas celebration my grandmother added alcohol to the eggnog. Two of my uncles decided to add more. After enjoying too much of the eggnog, my 6'2"

uncle decided to climb the 10' Christmas tree. Chaos followed with my grandmother screaming for someone to get him down, my aunt yelling for my grandmother to hush, and the brothers yelling at my aunt to

do something with her husband. At one such event, I remember hearing my aunt say something hurtful to one uncle, and thinking, *She didn't really mean that. She only said that because he said what he said.*

For all outside appearances, our home appeared stable and secure. My mother was active in school functions. All decisions about discipline were made by both parents. My parents rarely argued. They shared some hobbies. One hobby they both enjoyed was being members of a "Christian" motorcycle club. The Christian part meant that there was no drinking allowed and most activities were family oriented. We spent most Saturday afternoons at one member's house or another barbecuing and socializing. The members of the club were the same age as my parents. However, my parents began their family at a much younger age; therefore, my sisters and I were much older than the children of the other club members. We did not fit in with the adults or children. After the meal, my mother would always announce to the hostess, "You cooked; my girls can clean the kitchen." So while the children played and adults visited, my sisters and I washed dishes. My mother thought it was a good way to show appreciation to the hostess and teach us responsibility, although kitchen duty was routine for us at home. It made me feel like an unpaid servant. To this day I will not allow a guest to clean my kitchen.

While my dad's humor was entertaining, it was usually at the expense of someone else. My sisters and I were choice bait. We were told often that we were

beautiful, "but then again a mama buzzard thinks her babies are pretty too." He liked to tell me the only way I would be married was for him to place an ad in the newspaper. I would also have to get married by proxy because no man that saw me would want to marry me. Until the day he died, he would tell my husband thanks for saving him the ad fee. As children we did not understand that his sarcasm was actually intended to be backhanded compliments.

Both parents desired to rear perfect children. My dad's need to conceal his true emotions using humor and my mother's difficulty with intimate relationships provided little emotional support in the home.

My mother did not believe in complimenting children for fear they would grow up conceited. If my dad gave a compliment, it was followed by a sarcastic remark that stung so badly the compliment was washed away. Displays of emotions were discouraged and open communication was nonexistent. Any task completed was followed by “constructive criticism” in an effort to help us grow. When my dad drove long hauls, he would be gone from home for weeks. As a child, it seemed to me like he always came home the week report cards were issued. One by one we would stand before him as he sat in his recliner and evaluated each grade. My youngest sister’s report card was always perfect. My sister just younger than me made adequate grades and was questioned about each one. My grades were analyzed, and I would be asked why the Bs and Cs could not be higher. If I received an A in a class, my dad

would say, “It must have been easy if someone as dumb as you could make an A.” After each report card was scrutinized, he would hand it back to the owner and say, “It’s a good report card, baby.” I could never figure out why we were forced to sit through the equivalent of the Spanish Inquisition for “a good report card.” My youngest sister is extremely intelligent and very artistic. My sister just younger than myself is a gifted homemaker. She has been able to cook, clean, and sew since she started walking. I had no special talents as a child. I was just an average kid. As a result, I grew up believing I was less than adequate and would never amount to anything. I found comfort in books. I imagined myself as a character and escaped reality in every book I read. Every Friday when I left school, I had two books in my hands. Both were read before returning to school on Monday.

Fairly close to my seventeenth birthday during my junior year of high school, my dad announced that he was leaving the family. There had been no warning, no arguments, and no unexplained mood changes. He was just leaving. My mother was devastated. I had learned to hide my emotions and put up a good front. It appeared to everyone that I was strong and simply unaffected by my dad’s decision. Dealing with her own emotions, my mother was unable to support me when I fell apart a week after he left. I was not equipped with an emotional foundation to handle a crisis of this magnitude so I hid my pain with displays of anger. I

thought it was better to let people believe that I was

angry rather than weak enough to be hurt. Within two months the divorce was final, and three days later my dad married a long time family friend who had been married four times previously. My parents had gone to school with my dad's new wife. She had been in our home many times. Our families had socialized together during her marriages and divorces. We grew up with her children. She had always been proud of the fact that she received no child support from any of her ex-husbands, believing the mother was responsible for providing for her children. She somehow missed what was obvious to everyone else. Her new husband was supporting her kids. To her they were a new family, and his old family should simply go away. She deeply resented the idea of my dad providing for his children and told us at every opportunity. My mother had gone back to work, but in the 1970s women were not paid enough to provide for a family, especially if they had little education. We had purchased a larger home in November before my dad left in March. We kept the old house for rental income. If we had no renter, my mother had two mortgages and three children to provide for on a meager salary. Child support was essential for survival. My dad was involved in providing for his new wife and her four children. He felt no obligation to his first family. More than once my mother used the court system to intervene. She fought for every dime she received.

The summer between my junior and senior year of high school, I worked to buy school clothes for my sisters and myself because my mother lacked the funds. During my senior year, I worked part time after school to purchase my prom dress and invitations for graduation. During my youngest sister's senior year, my mother complained about the cost of her graduation. She told me that the number of items my sister was demanding was not available when I graduated. I explained they were available, but I did not ask for them because I knew we had little money. During my senior year, I became ill. My mother kept threatening to take me to the doctor if I was not better the next day. Every day I proclaimed that I was getting better, but I knew I wasn't. Knowing my mother did not have the money for a doctor visit, I stayed in bed for over a week. I probably could have returned to school in three days if I had gone to the doctor, but I was worried about the money. Every decision we made was based on our finances and recently when my

mother learned I never purchased a yearbook because I did not have the money, she became very upset. Although very different, my husband's childhood was no more secure than mine. His parents had grown up on farms during a time that was considered safe. When they married and moved to the city for employment, they failed to recognize the difference in the culture change. Therefore, my husband and his siblings grew up with little supervision or restrictions. My husband took advantage of the lack of structure

as a teenager. He and his friends partied, drank alcohol, and basically lived by the creed 'eat, drink, and be merry.' My husband had very little direction in his life until accepting Christ as Savior in his late teens.