

Love for Family and Friends

“In family life, love is the oil that eases friction,
the cement that binds closer together, and
the music that brings harmony.”

—EVA EVELYN BURROWS,
13TH GENERAL OF THE SALVATION ARMY

Family has been celebrated in numerous popular songs, e.g., the bouncy Sister Sledge anthem “We Are Family” and—my personal favorite—Carole King’s “Child of Mine,” and with reason, because the family is the foundation for all of our love relationships to come, good or bad. I believe if children have but *one* person in their world who loves them fiercely, they will survive. If they don’t have the assurance that they matter from at least one adult, then they are broken for life. I was raised in a traditional “nuclear” family, the norm in our little town in Reedsport, Oregon. It wasn’t until years after I left home that I discovered how “*un-normal*” our American concept of family—a mother, father, two kids and a dog—is in many other cultures. Elsewhere in the world families live in dwellings with

multiple generations, extended family members and even, in some cultures, multiple wives. My children have never experienced a “normal” family atmosphere, with a mother and father and full siblings. But they have known that they have a mother who loves them fiercely, and they know that I will love them unconditionally all the days of their lives.

As a child, I learned to love from the best, my mom, Wilma. Whatever her shortcomings, she believed in all four of her children and made sure we believed in ourselves. Her encouragement created in me a solid core of self-confidence that has been invaluable to me in my career as a radio host. Mom was a big woman—she stood over six feet tall, and her arm span was that of a giant. And, oh, when she wrapped you in those strong arms, you *knew* you were loved!

Wilma showed her love in a million different ways—one was that she baked treats for her family. How we loved her cookies! Chocolate chip for the boys, oatmeal raisin for me and Dad, sugar cookies and applesauce with spice during the holidays. My parents both died within a few years of each other, each at the age of fifty-seven, and among the houseful of “stuff” that my siblings and I were left to sell or donate was a cookie jar. That cookie jar sat in Mom’s kitchen for forty years and was rarely empty. Years later I walked into a thrift store and saw an identical cookie jar and started to cry, so I bought it and took it home. Not because I needed a new cookie jar, but because that ceramic jar reminded me of the hot cookies my mom would bake for us every week

and the way she would ask, “Sis, you want to help me bake cookies?” This question was really an invitation to stand in our tiny kitchen and spend time laughing and talking to Mom about my friends, my homework, my latest crush, my future dreams. As we made cookies together, my mom and I bonded in love.

I also learned a lot about love from my father. It is only now, as my own children are growing at the speed of light, that his lessons are resounding in my heart. He was a stoic man, not one to hug and kiss and gush like Mom, but he showed his love through his steadfast commitment to his family. When the toaster broke, he would stay up all night to repair it, so we could have toast with our eggs in the morning. When the holidays rolled around, he disappeared into the garage, his makeshift Santa’s workshop, to build toys and wooden objects for everyone in our neighborhood.

Although our parents give us our first lessons in love, perhaps our best teachers about love are our kids. The greatest joy of love in my life has been in giving birth to three wonderful children and adopting seven more. When I held my firstborn, Isaiah, I knew that my life would never be the same. For the rest of my natural life, my heart would be walking around outside my body, in the form of my child. I learned more about love from Isaiah in the first few hours of his life than I had learned in the twenty-four years of my life prior to nursing him to my breast. For eight years Isaiah and I were alone, just the two of us, going camping and dirt

biking, moving from state to state and exploring every patch of beauty along the way.

All of my kids are special, and all are very different. I stand in amazement when I ponder my three biological children, how they could have emerged from the same womb and all be so completely different from one another. My firstborn, Isaiah, was never once sent to the principal's office during all his years in school. He was never in a fight. .he never talked back to a teacher. .he obeyed all the rules, and would get so frustrated with me when I would break all the rules. My lastborn, Zachariah, gets a note sent home from school every day. His talking back has been elevated to an art form. He doesn't own a pair of jeans for twenty-four hours before the knees are ripped. As Isaiah taught me about God's quiet and gentle love, Zachariah has taught me that God has a wicked sense of humor!

Lonika is my oldest daughter, and although I did not give birth to her or raise her (she was adopted as an adult), she is the daughter of my heart. A single mother, Lonika works hard every day to provide for her daughter, Jayla. Lonni has a great sense of humor, and when she sets her mind to accomplish something, she does not give up. She is determined, focused and very gracious.

Shaylah has a tender, sweet heart. Like my firstborn, my secondborn was also graced with a very gentle spirit. She is not a rough-and-tumble sort of girl the way I was. She moves with grace and is always a peacemaker, not a troublemaker like her mamma!

Emanuel, Tanginique and Trey Jerome are siblings—all born to the same mother but with different fathers—whom I adopted out of our very broken foster care system. Tragically, they were even more abused by foster care givers than they were by their drug-addicted mother. Because of all the upheaval and abuse in their lives before they came, in their early teens, under my care, Manny, Tangi and Trey Jerome have attachment issues, and they all left my home less than five years after I adopted them. All three have beautiful smiles, outgoing personalities and strong wills to survive. The youngest of the three, TJ, works for me now and lives close by with his girlfriend and his infant son. When TJ found out Abbi was pregnant, he was only eighteen. I'm so proud of the way he stepped up to the plate and vowed he would be the father to his son that he never had, and of the way he parents his son. He is totally committed to his baby and to his fiancée and works hard every day to provide for his young family. When I see TJ holding Nehemiah, and talking to him with such deep love, I know the many trials and tribulations that I went through when Trey was a teenager have paid off. We are far closer today than when he came into my life at the age of nine, and I pray that one day his siblings will also decide to walk away from the trauma and poverty of their current life and walk back into the family that is waiting to welcome them.

My two youngest boys are Zacky and TK (Thomas Karlton). TK also became a part of my life through adoption. A woman

who facilitates adoptions contacted me one day, wondering if I knew anyone who'd be interested in adopting a young African-American toddler whose fourteen-year-old mom felt overwhelmed. I asked her to send me photos and information, and I'd make inquiries. Less than a month later, two-year-old Thomas Karlton was a part of our family. It was an impulsive decision on my part, and the timing wasn't the best, as I was going through a divorce and Zacky had been diagnosed with mild autism and other special needs. But something about TK's wide dark eyes melted my heart, and I couldn't bear the thought that he might have to go into foster care. TK is always eager to help and please others. He has a huge bright smile, and loves to play silly games, like crawling on his knees on the floor and pretending to be an alligator or a space monster, as he chases his younger sister and nephew.

And as I write this, I have just adopted two more children, daughters from Ghana, Africa, whom I've come to know on my mission trips there. At thirteen, Angel is a tiny slip of a girl, just six months younger than my mini-me, Shaylah, but she is over a foot shorter and weighs just seventy-five pounds. She has suffered malnutrition all her life, as well as malaria and other diseases. Blessing is only four. The day the adoption was final, I took the girls out to breakfast to celebrate. Angel and even little Blessing ate six eggs apiece! They had never seen a smorgasbord before, and could not stop returning for more boiled eggs.

It seems most of my adult life has been spent folding

laundry and trying to come up with creative Halloween costumes made from paper bags and pipe cleaners, screeching “Get in your car seat!” and “Stop hitting your brother!” and driving carloads of kids on field trips. But each day my children teach me. About patience. About forgiveness. About life. About love.

What have you learned from your children? And equally important, what are they learning from you?

“A friend is someone who knows the song
in your heart and can sing it back to you
when you have forgotten the words.”

—UNKNOWN

After the family, the next stage in our education about love comes from friendship. Most of us can remember how proud we were as youngsters to have a “best friend.” As adults, too, we cherish our friends—those special people in our lives who are there for us at the best and worst of times, who add the icing to the cake of our successes and bring light to the darkness of our sorrows. Rock music has paid tribute to friendship in songs like Michael W. Smith’s “Friends Are Friends Forever,” Bill Withers’s “Lean on Me” and the theme song from the movie *Toy Story*, “You’ve Got a Friend in Me,” by Randy Newman.

The joy of friendship has been abundantly mine. I have

been blessed to know some pretty amazing people thus far in my life, and for whatever reason, God has allowed me to peer inside the soul of some of His finest handiwork. Friendship is precious to me, and I am deeply thankful for my many wonderful experiences of this kind of love. My childhood friends Natasha, Dee Dee and Billy are still a big part of my life today. Dee Dee and I share so many memories of past stages in our lives, and often reminisce and laugh about our days in disco dresses and halter tops, and the guys we were trying to attract (and sometimes did, with mixed results) by wearing them. Janey, my producer, is a friend who is closer than a sister. We were roommates for many years, she was my birthing coach for my last two biological children and we've worked together for the past eighteen years. I know if I needed a new lung, Janey would be the first to try and donate hers. And because of the strength of the love my girlfriends share with me, each week, on the air, I bond with my "Friday nite girls."

As you read about the friendships here, think about your own "friends of the heart," and the difference they've made and continue to make in your life. You may find yourself agreeing with Ralph Waldo Emerson, who said, "A friend may well be reckoned the masterpiece of nature."

That was almost forty years ago, but it seems like only forty minutes. My dad has long gone to his eternal reward, no doubt thanking his Father in Heaven for answering his prayer. I pray for my son daily, as I'm sure most fathers do. Let's keep praying for our children. God is a great protector, and now you know why I said this is really a story about two loving fathers—mine and the Father of us all.

God Bless,
Al

"My Father's Eyes," performed by Eric Clapton.
Songwriter: Eric Clapton.

“BLUE EYES”

Hey, Delilah,

I’ve got a story about our family and the way God has loved and blessed us.

I have been married to my wife, Dawn, since May 29, 1993, and it’s been a great journey so far. She always dreamed of having a little girl to dress up in pink and pass down her massive Barbie collection to, and began to dream of this daughter as soon as the first stick turned pink.

In April of 1995 we were blessed with a little boy whom we called Ben. Despite her Barbie dreams, my wife was as thrilled as I was with our healthy little boy—it was just the first baby, after all.

Well, Delilah, 2.5 years later we were pregnant again, and we were sure this time God was going to give us a little girl—one of each, right? Wrong! On February 14, 1998, we got our second son, Luke, who came at thirty-three weeks and spent three weeks in neonatal care.

Okay, now it’s again 2.5 years later—September 2000—and after much fear we made it through the full nine months. . .and, yes, another son, Owen, was born. Of course we feel so happy having three healthy, blond-haired, blue-eyed boys, but there was just a brief “Not again” moment. Now we have two male dogs

“LIGHT A SINGLE CANDLE”

Dear Delilah,

Children learn what love is from their families, and I'd like to share with you and your listeners the lessons I learned from mine.

As a small child in the 1950s, I stayed for a while with my great uncle and great aunt. Uncle Avery and Aunt Lucy loved children but never had any of their own, and they made it their personal mission to make sure that all the children in our extended family received at least one gift.

These surrogate parents also taught me the true meaning of Christmas. A few days before Christmas, Uncle Avery would bring in bags of fruit, nuts and candy. Aunt Lucy and I would collect paper bags and boxes, colorful ribbon and other trimmings. They showed me how to fill the bags, and then Uncle Avery or Aunt Lucy would say, “This family is having a bad year, Brenda, put a little extra in those bags.”

I learned about sharing, compassion, duty and how even a small child can help.

On Christmas Eve, we drove around four counties, leaving boxes and bags for the children, and sometimes money or bolts of cloth. I learned about sharing, compassion, duty and how even a small child can help do God's work on His Son's day.

Delilah, in memory of my "parents," thank you for your wonderful program, and please play a song in memory of Uncle Avery and Aunt Lucy. Thank you, Delilah.

God bless,
Brenda

"Light a Single Candle," performed by Anne Cochran.
Songwriters: Jim Brickman, Delilah Rene.