

## Blind and Clueless

*That the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give to you the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of Him, the eyes of your understanding being enlightened; that you may know what is the hope of His calling.*

—Ephesians 1:17, 18, NKJV

When Carolann and I met for the second time—seven years after a fleeting introduction—we were both twenty-five years old. I (César) had just completed a master’s degree at the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary at Andrews University, and I was still tender with the bruises of a recent heartbreak, cloaked in academic robes that couldn’t quite cover the rawness of a failed engagement. Carolann, poised in the professional world as a cardio-thoracic ICU nurse at Loma Linda University Medical Center, carried her own silent ache from a relationship she had just ended.

On the surface, we looked whole, competent, accomplished, and earnest in our faith. But beneath the polished exteriors were two souls limping toward one another, each with the unspoken hope that perhaps *this connection* would finally soothe the simmering aches that still pulsed beneath the surface. We assumed, as so many do, that we were ready—that emotional maturity naturally accompanied our age, faith, and education. We were wrong.

Our courtship unfolded across highways and heartstrings, stretched thin between Fresno and Loma Linda—five hours and entire worlds apart. I was pastoring a vibrant youth group in the heart of California’s Central

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Valley, while Carolann worked twelve-hour shifts caring for post heart-surgery patients, their lives often hanging by threads as fine as breath. We saw each other only once or twice a month—brief, golden hours that we cherished like hidden treasure.

With no texting, FaceTime, or even frequent phone calls to fill in the gaps, our visits became carefully curated performances. Every moment was a highlight reel—beaches bathed in sunset, dinners steeped in candlelight, laughter echoing down ocean-side paths. We were on our best behavior, each playing the part of the partner we hoped to be, rather than revealing the one we truly were. There was no time—or appetite—for conflict or discomfort. Our fragile connection felt too precious to risk with honesty.

When it was my (Carolann's) turn to travel north, I stepped into César's world, joining him, his sister, and his church community. Sabbaths were marathons—morning services blended into afternoon youth activities, games, and late-night conversations. Sundays were short, bittersweet interludes before another undesired flight back to Southern California. In hindsight, it is clear: we were not intentional about building a foundation strong enough to support the weight of marriage. We didn't know how. We simply didn't know what we didn't know.

Though we had grown up in Christian homes, neither of us had witnessed emotionally healthy marriages up close. Our parents loved us deeply—of that we are certain. And for that love, we remain profoundly grateful. But emotional literacy? Conflict resolution? Intimacy without anxiety? These had not been modeled for us. They had done their best with what they had, often doing better than their parents had done for them. And so had we, as children, stumbled through developmental stages without a compass.

We stood at the altar as two well-intentioned but emotionally underdeveloped individuals, beaming behind borrowed confidence, and recited vows. I married a beautiful bride, and she married a dashing, passionate man—but neither recognized the deeply wounded inner child housed within the other. We believed the books we had read, the premarital counseling we completed, and the heartfelt promises we wrote would be

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enough to sustain us. We were wrong again.

Unconsciously, we were each hoping the other would become the balm for our childhood wounds—the ever-present, ever-attuned caregiver we longed for. Though we bore adult titles, careers, and aspirations, our hearts still cried out for the unconditional love, unshakable presence, and soothing assurance that was missing in our formative years.

### **Blaming and hiding**

It didn't take long for the invisible wounds we carried into marriage to begin bleeding into our shared life.

The illusion of romantic harmony started to fray after the honeymoon phase faded. Our carefully polished personas, once so full of charm and optimism, began to crack under the weight of everyday disappointments. The subtle irritations gave way to recurring misunderstandings, which, left unspoken and unresolved, evolved into mounting resentment.

Instead of turning toward each other with curiosity or compassion, we turned away with suspicion, hurt, and blame. Slowly, almost imperceptibly, we stopped seeing each other as allies and began viewing one another as adversaries. The person who was once the object of our affection became the perceived source of our pain.

It was deeply disorienting.

How could the same man who could deliver a soul-stirring sermon from the pulpit now seem so emotionally unavailable at home? How could the same woman who poured compassion into every patient's bedside feel so cold and unreachable when conflict arose?

We were ministering to others with the love and grace we struggled to offer each other. Publicly, we were “Pastor César and Nurse Carolann”—spiritual leaders and community servants, admired and appreciated. Privately, we were emotionally disconnected, spiritually exhausted, and silently grieving the growing chasm between us.

Our home became a stage for emotional masquerade. We became experts at compartmentalizing—smiling in ministry while sighing in marriage, delivering comfort to others while nursing our own unmet

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needs in silence. The energy it took to keep up appearances grew heavier with each passing month.

Once brimming with dreams of unity and purpose, the reservoir of hope began to drain slowly . . . then more rapidly. Disappointment bred disillusionment. Disillusionment gave birth to despair. We learned how to look OK on the outside while crumbling on the inside.

We didn't realize then that when two broken souls marry, love alone, at least the immature kind, will not shield them from the consequences of their unhealed wounds. Marriage does not magically erase childhood trauma or insecure attachments. It exposes them.

No one had told us that pain travels with you into marriage, that emotional immaturity doesn't stay behind in the past. It moves in, unpacking its bags and claiming the middle of the bed. We operated from relationship maps that had never been tested for the terrain ahead—directions written in invisible ink—assumptions passed down from generations who were doing the best they could . . . but often in inefficient survival mode.

We were trying to build a covenant with duct tape and good intentions.

### **FAMILY: Where we learn how to do relationships**

The family is not just the first classroom of life—it is the most formative. Long before children can express what love is, they absorb its patterns and sense its presence—or absence—in the air they breathe. The way parents speak to one another, the way tension crackles in a room, the way joy lingers—or doesn't—after a shared meal, these are the unwritten, often unspoken, lessons that shape our understanding of what relationships should feel like.

We don't just learn how to communicate or connect—we learn how to be in the world.

Children are relational sponges. They soak in everything: the warmth of a parent's gentle voice, the cold silence of unresolved conflict, the sudden slam of a door, the affectionate laughter during a game night, the way anger simmers or explodes, and the way pain is handled—or ignored. All of it etches grooves into the developing soul, forming a subconscious

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soundtrack that will hum beneath every future relationship.

Both of us grew up in homes with strong Christian values. Our parents, each in their way, loved us deeply. That love was sincere, but it was also shaped—and in many ways, constrained—by their histories of pain and survival. They had their emotional limps, their stories of longing and loss. We understand now that they parented us from the depths of their capacities, often doing better for us than had been done for them.

And for that, we honor them.

But love, even in its truest form, doesn't always come with the tools needed to build emotional security. We were nurtured in homes where faith was paramount, but emotional fluency was not. We inherited an unspoken rulebook of how relationships should work: don't talk about pain, don't rock the boat, keep moving forward. We grew up loved, but not always seen. Safe, but not always soothed.

We transitioned from childhood to adulthood as best we could without truly understanding the unresolved emotional legacies we carried. We knew how to serve in church, honor our families, work hard, and hope. But we didn't know how to recognize the subtle signs of insecure attachment or how to create safety when our partner triggered our deepest fears of rejection or abandonment.

We had no idea that the childhood wounds we had so carefully buried would rise again, repackaged in marital arguments, disappointment, or emotional distance.

And yet, the grace of God is stunning.

On our first official date, I (Carolann) did something that many would consider bold—perhaps even reckless. I told César, without apology or evasion, that I didn't want children. I said it straight, not to shock him, but because honesty, at that moment, felt like the only gift I had to offer. I had no idea how he would react, but I knew this truth needed to be laid bare.

I didn't know then how deeply that declaration would touch an old longing in César's heart. He had spent years quietly imagining a life filled with laughter echoing across a backyard, the soft patter of children's feet running toward him at the end of the day. He had even teared up at the

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sight of his future children, still only imagined, while washing dishes in his small college apartment, peering out the window into a dreamscape of someday.

But César, in his quiet resolve, accepted my words without argument. He decided to accept me without trying to change my decisions. He never asked me once if I had reconsidered, never pressuring, never pleading. He respected the clarity I had shared on our first date, and we both carried that silent agreement into the next seven years of our shared life.

Ironically—or perhaps providentially—those years were filled with the laughter and chaos of youth ministry. Our days and weekends were saturated with teens, youth, and young adults: messy, beautiful, vibrant souls who filled our hearts and calendars with energy, questions, and purpose. It was almost as if God was slowly tilling the soil of our hearts—softening the ground for a surprise that neither of us saw coming.

And then, one ordinary August afternoon in 1994, came the unexpected news: we were going to be parents.

Shock and joy coalesced into a flood of tears and laughter. It was as if God had whispered, *“I know the desires of your heart, even the ones you buried.”*

That day marked the beginning of a transformation we never anticipated. Becoming parents wasn't just a change of circumstance—it was a reorientation of our entire worldview. Suddenly, we were not only stewards of our brokenness but also entrusted with the lives of two precious souls whose stories would unfold under our care.

And still, we remained so heartbreakingly unaware of just how much of our unhealed pain would be passed on if left unaddressed.

### **Parents shape their children**

If marriage had revealed our blind spots, parenthood amplified them.

Suddenly, we were no longer only dealing with the emotional fallout between the two of us—now, our words, our tones, our emotional temperature would shape the inner worlds of our children. The stakes were unimaginably higher. We had been entrusted with two unrepeatable

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and exceptional souls. Their wide, trusting eyes looked to us not only for nourishment and safety, but for the template of how love is given, how apologies are made, how conflict is resolved, and how grace is extended.

Parenting quickly exposed how thin our emotional skin still was. Despite earning degrees in theology and marriage and family therapy, studying developmental psychology and understanding diagnostic labels, we were still beginners when it came to emotional presence. All the clinical knowledge in the world could not compensate for the inner healing we had yet to do.

We knew *about* trauma. But we had not yet reckoned with our own.

And like water through a cracked vessel, that unresolved pain began to seep into our parenting.

The truth is sobering: Children don't just inherit our genes—they inherit our emotional patterns, our fears, and our unfinished stories. Whether spoken or unspoken, healed or hidden, our inner worlds echo into theirs. Our unresolved pain becomes the background noise of their childhood.

A 2014 study confirmed what many of us already sense: when parents carry mental health challenges—depression, anxiety, trauma, or addiction—their children often develop social, emotional, and behavioral problems at alarming rates.<sup>1</sup> These issues aren't limited to genetics; the emotional climate of the home shapes them. Children of struggling parents may lack consistent emotional attunement. They may receive less validation, fewer affirmations, and more unpredictable responses. Even the best intentions are overshadowed by the invisible fog of internal distress.

One child might learn to shrink and people-please, to never cause waves. Another might explode, unable to regulate the emotional storms inside. Some grow up feeling unseen; others, too responsible. None of this is intentional—it's generational.

A more recent 2022 review affirmed these findings. It went further: homes marked by hostility and low positive parenting create the perfect environment for stress, relational dysfunction, and emotional insecurity to take root.<sup>2</sup>

And here is the hard truth: trauma does not disappear just because we

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become parents. Parenting often reactivates the very wounds we thought we had buried. A child's tantrum might echo the chaos of our childhood home. Their emotional needs may trigger our long-forgotten longings. Their vulnerability might scare us, because it mirrors our own.

What our children need most is not our perfection but our presence—not flawless parenting but authentic adults on their healing journey who are willing to be engaged in the hard work of transformation. When we prioritize our emotional and spiritual growth, we offer our children a model of humility, courage, and resilience.

And that is one of the greatest gifts we could ever give them.

### **Changing the tide, one family at a time**

The data is clear, but for us, it's far more than just statistics—it's sacred. These studies are not cold facts; they are mirrors, reflections of our journey and the journey of so many families we've walked alongside. They confirm what we've come to believe with conviction: when adults delay dealing with their pain, they unintentionally multiply it in the lives of those they love most.

What remains unhealed in us will almost always become a burden for someone else to carry.

We've watched this heartbreaking pattern unfold—not only in our own home but across countless others. A parent ignores their mounting anxiety, and their child begins to stutter under the weight of unspoken tension. A father numbs his depression in silence, and his daughter learns that love is something she must earn. A mother, haunted by her own lack of nurture, becomes perfectionistic and harsh, trying to mold her children into what she herself was never allowed to be.

Each time we remain silent in the face of our own pain, it does not just go away—it seeps into our parenting, our marriage, our vocations.

*Pain that is not transformed will inevitably be transmitted.*

It doesn't have to be this way.

Healing and change are possible. But they require courage—the kind of courage that's not flashy or grand but quiet and persistent. The courage to

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look inward, to say, “I need help,” to acknowledge that the way we were parented may not be the way we want to parent. That we need more than just willpower; we need God’s grace, guidance, and often, professional support.

Each small step toward healing is a revolutionary act. It is one family deciding, “The dysfunction stops here.” One parent saying, “My children will not inherit my silence, my rage, or my despair.” One adult daring to believe that their worth is not diminished by their wounds but made more profound and more powerful when those wounds are met with God’s healing love.

Whenever someone chooses to seek help—to call a therapist, open up to a friend, or cry out to God in desperation—they are not only fighting for themselves. They are fighting for their children. Their grandchildren. For the legacy of wholeness that can be born from one person’s decision to break the cycle.

We have lived this reality ourselves. We know the power of God’s grace to redeem what feels beyond repair. And we’ve witnessed how one person’s healing can change the emotional climate of an entire household.

That’s why we plead with every parent, teen, or future parent reading these words: Don’t ignore your mental health. Don’t minimize your wounds. Don’t wait until the damage spills over and leaves scars on those who never caused your pain in the first place.

You matter. Your story matters. And your healing matters—not only for you but for generations yet unborn.

When we invite the Holy Spirit to begin this work within us, we open the door to radical change—not perfection, but transformation, not control, but connection. And we begin, one family at a time, to build homes where healing, not hurt, becomes the generational inheritance.

### **Discipling through loving relationships**

Children don’t learn grace by memorizing its definition—they learn it by living inside its warmth.

They learn it when their father, instead of raising his voice, kneels to

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look them in the eyes and listens. They absorb it when their mother, though frustrated, softens her tone and says, “I’m sorry, I was harsh—can we try again?” They begin to understand divine mercy not because they heard a sermon on forgiveness, but because they saw it offered over spilled juice, broken curfews, or misunderstood words.

Spiritual formation doesn’t begin in a sanctuary—it starts around the dinner table, in minivan conversations, in late-night tuck-ins when children whisper their fears in the dark.

Children absorb God’s character by watching how we treat one another when things don’t go our way. They internalize the gospel not by theological expositions but through the lived-out gospel of grace in the messy, unpredictable, holy grind of daily family life.

When a mother chooses joy and patience as she welcomes her husband home, though he forgot the salad dressing *again*, grace gets a face. When a father wraps his arms around his wife with tenderness, even after she was snappy and impatient earlier that day, the children see that love is not earned by performance—it is sustained by covenant.

In these unscripted moments, the heart of discipleship unfolds.

Every time we pause before speaking the reactive words our parents might have used. Every time we breathe, pray, and choose a gentler response. Every time we discipline with redemptive love instead of punishment laced with shame. We are weaving the fabric of grace into our family story. We are discipling through love, not lecture.

And this, we believe, is the true spiritual inheritance parents can offer their children—not moral perfection, but a home where grace is felt, seen, and embodied.

No family will ever get it perfectly right. Post-Eden parenting is inherently imperfect because perfection is not the goal. The goal is faithfulness. The goal is to become the kind of people through whom God’s Spirit can move, love, restore, and reveal Jesus.

When our parenting failures are soaked in God’s grace—when we own them, repent of them, and model humility to our children—they don’t become stumbling blocks. They become stepping stones because our

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children will see firsthand what it means to be human, forgiven, and in daily partnership with the Holy Spirit.

### REFLECT

These questions are offered as a reflective exercise you can choose to process alone, as part of your prayer journaling, with a trusted friend, a small circle of trusted fellow sojourners, a trained pastor, or a Christian counselor. We encourage you to ask the Holy Spirit to guide, comfort, and support you as you take the time to reflect and process the reading material more personally and practically.

1. How can acknowledging and accepting your emotional wounds help improve the quality of your current relationships?

What pain have you silenced or minimized? What would it feel like to face it—not alone, but with God beside you?

2. Since practicing self-compassion is essential to healing and building healthier, more authentic relationships, how can you extend more compassion to yourself (and others) today or this week?

Am you speaking to yourself with the same gentleness you offer others? How might grace toward yourself overflow into grace for those closest to you?

3. What relationship or parenting pattern did you learn in your family of origin that you would like to break? What legacy would you want to pass forward instead?

Which learned behaviors no longer serve your relationships? What new patterns would reflect the healing, Spirit-led person you long to become?

4. What impressions did the Spirit give you regarding the quality of your relationships with friends, spouse, and children?

Where is there harmony? Where is there pain? Where is there an invitation for healing, deeper connection, or honest communication?