THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF LEADERSHIP THROUGH PARENTING

—BLAZE BURNHAM

Leadership is a thought-provoking word that encompasses practically everything in the realm of life, love, and the pursuit of delight. Before beginning a doctorate in leadership studies at Gonzaga University, I regarded leadership as a skill that specific people in management roles practiced. I felt as if one had to be an executive in a sizeable professional establishment to understand the practice of governance and how one could undertake the nuances of practicing the leadership vocation. One can discover leadership in personal, family, professional, organizational, communal, social, and global life.

No single definition of leadership exists and none comprehensive enough to adequately address the complexity of leadership. I have observed leadership be present, appearing, or found everywhere and sometimes hard to name. Leadership is ubiquitous (Myatt, 2013). What interests me is developing a guidance stance from where an understanding of leadership essence originates. I believe management uniqueness creates through social construction, which I will discuss in more depth below. "Leaders also typically adopt one of three main leadership styles: 1) transformational; 2) transactional; and 3) servant" (Cooper, 2015, p. 50). I am interested in servant-leadership and how servant-leaders can be socially constructed, enhanced, and embodied in how a person moves through the world as a parent.

Parenting is one of the most critical leadership roles one will ever assume (Kudo et al., 2012). Healthy parents function as leaders from a child's birth through childhood, adolescence, and adulthood. "Social constructionism is a general term sometimes applied to theories that emphasize the socially created nature of social life" (Oxford Reference, 2021, Quick Reference section). In social construction thinking, parents hold the keys to how their children will be socially constructed and use their own created influence to raise their children. Parenting styles become influenced by the culture in which one is educated. These principles and standards are conveyed through child-rearing exercises from one generation to the next (Descartes, 2012). There is often no one to monitor one's parenting within the immediate family dwelling other than a spouse or child. Of course, this parental monitoring can come from external entities such as teachers, friends, coworkers but more than likely. This is just a glimpse of what is happening within the family socially. Even then, one individual can dominate the situation. Manipulation and corrosion can become the tools of choice. Popper (2004) noted that in discussing family relationships, "the most basic explanation stems from the family dynamicity, where big, strong figures take care of dependent protégés. In 1939, Freud saw a connection between the emotional bond with leaders and parenting relations" (p. 110).

As applied to servant-leadership, I am most intrigued with how social construction can affect the family through parenting. While fundamental beliefs rest on the strongbox of both roles of parent and servant-leader, there are similarities between the principles of both positions. Northouse (2016) points to characteristics of servant-leadership, including listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, commitment to the growth of people, and building community. Compared to the seven guiding principles of parenthood coined by Dave Willis (2014), which include

Kids need your presence, not your Presents, Rules without relationships lead to rebellion; My kids will follow my example more than my words; A strong family is built on a strong marriage; I need to be my kids' biggest encourager, not their biggest critic; If I don't teach my kids, someone else will; Share as much Faith, Food and FUN as you can. (para. 7 guiding principles of parenthood)

Leadership can have positive possibilities through constructive parenting. In this paper, I aim to explore the interconnections between social construction, servant-leadership, and servant-leadership in the family context of parenting.

SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION

Social construction theory is broad, wide-ranging, and far extending. Social construction presumes that people construct, create, make, and invent their understandings of the world (Leeds-Hurwitz, 2016). These are the meanings humans give to encounters with others or various products they or others create. Social construction also assumes that they do this together, synchronizing with others rather than individually (Leeds-Hurwitz, 2016). Social construction is a theoretical approach used in multiple disciplines, including psychology, sociology, philosophy, anthropology, linguistics, and education. The foundation of social construction in modern times can be traced to Berger and Luckmann (1966) in their book *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*. As the combined creation of a sociologist (Berger) and philosopher (Luckmann), this book set the stage early for the significance of a social constructivist approach to multiple disciplines and emphasizes the function of language in molding the human understanding of the world. Lock and Strong (2010) described these tenets as concerned with meaning and knowledge as crucial for human

activities and having their beginnings in social interactions and being embedded in socio-cultural processes. These principles are the foundation upon which social construction theory is built. Lock and Strong (2010) stated that social constructionists have a problematic connection with 'essentialism' and that social construction is concerned with revealing the social world's operations.

Social construction theory is comprehensive, extensive, and expansive. The foundational constructs of this theory are based on five specific tenets. Lock and Strong (2010) defined the first tenet as being concerned with "meaning and understanding as the central feature of human activities" (p. 6). The second tenet views meaning and understanding as having "their beginnings in social interactions, in shared agreements as to what these symbolic forms are to be taken to be" (p. 7). The third notes "ways of meaning-making, being inherently embedded in socio-cultural processes, are specific to particular times and places. Thus, the meanings of specific events, and our ways of understanding them, vary over different situations" (p. 7). The fourth states that "most social constructionists have an uneasy relationship with 'essentialism': that is, with the idea that one of the significant goals of psychology is to uncover the essential characteristics of people" (p. 7). Finally, the fifth tenet is the "adoption of a critical perspective to the topics at hand, that is, a concern with revealing the operations of the social world and the political apportioning of power that is often accomplished unawares, to change these operations and replace them with something more just" (p. 8).

Berger and Luckmann (1966) discussed social construction basics through the lens of universal maintenance and symbolic universes:

> Specific procedures of universe-maintenance become necessary when the symbolic universe has become a problem. As long as this is not the case, the symbolic universe is self-maintaining, which is

self-legitimating by the sheer facticity of its objective existence in the society in question. (p. 105)

The authors noted that the symbolic universe could be anything such as one's relationships with others, the environments where one has been raised, and relationships with humans in general. The belief systems cultivated through these symbolic universes in which we live and navigate are legitimized by our nurtured principles and become our symbolic universe. Our symbolic universe and sense of meaning develop from our engagement and interpretation of the world. Universal maintenance is happening to us and around us as we move through our lives. Universe maintenance can be activated when there is a problem with the symbolic universe. Symbolic universes have flaws, imperfections, problems; thus, symbolic universes require universal maintenance. "A significant occasion for the development of universe-maintaining conceptualization arises when a society is confronted with another society having a greatly different history" (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, p. 107).

I observe this in my human-to-human interactions in parental, family, and work environments. As I focus on the parental setting, in my experience, it appears that parents can become the central characters responsible for maintaining the symbolic universe of the family unit. At the same time, their children are creating their symbolic universe, allowing for a reasonable time to align both the parent and the child's symbolic universes for the good of the family unit and humanity. If both parent and child can work together to define the norms of the symbolic universe of the family unit, conflict might be less likely to arise. I have noted that not all struggles are harmful, but with aligning symbolic universes, parents and children can move toward stability and equilibrium. "Individuals differ, of course, because biological processes are inherently variable" (Bateson, 2014, p. 285). Because of these

biological processes that are variable, humans inherently carry their history. These histories are individually unique and create the potential for universe-maintaining to work through these conflicts and use universe-maintenance as a sort of "counseling" to bring resolution or understanding to conflict. A study (Jit et al., 2016) suggests that servant-leaders manifest conflict management styles that are more persuasive, compassionate, and participative. Servant-leadership is a leadership style that can be useful in navigating the atmosphere of the family dynamic. For example, in my family, we have instituted many servant-leadership characteristics: listening with empathy that has provided a pleasant foundation for open, authentic, and loving conversations with meaningful questions that provoke a sense of love and trustworthy understanding within the relationship of parent and child.

SERVANT-LEADERSHIP

There are many leadership styles, models, and theories. Servant-leadership is one of these theories. "Servant leadership is a holistic leadership approach that engages followers in multiple dimensions (e.g., relational, ethical, emotional, spiritual), such that they empower to grow into what they are capable of becoming" (Eva et al., 2019, p. 111). In my family, this holistic leadership approach has been beneficial and has improved the ebb and flow of our household in a positive direction. Eva et al. (2019) further noted that research on servant-leadership can be grouped into three areas, one that focuses on the conceptual development of servant-leadership, another where research concentrates on emerging processes of servant-leadership and examining relationships between servant-leadership and conclusions by way of cross-sectional research and finally a developing model stage where exploration designs are being employed to go beyond superficial relationships to understand better the background, tools, and conditions of servant-leadership. I believe leadership types can be thought of as social constructions.

Using a social constructionist lens frees us to recreate the notion of leader or how leadership happens. Perhaps the focus should not be on leadership as a sole entity, but on how all members can co-create a future that maximizes the group's effectiveness. (Roberts, 2007, p. 6)

Greenleaf (2002) proposed that the best test for evaluating if a person is a servant-leader is also difficult to assess:

Do those served grow as persons? Do they, *while being served*, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants? And what is the effect on the least privileged in society? Will they benefit or at least not be further deprived? (p. 27)

In my experience as a parent, serving has been a primary role. "Parents, by the very nature of our roles, serve in a leadership position while we raise our children. A servant-leader realizes that their ability to influence others and achieve any vision significantly comes from serving others" (Miller, 2017, para. 1). Among the many leadership types, servant-leadership is notable for its connection to parenting and the family dynamic. The servant-leadership idea originated from Robert K. Greenleaf's reading of Hermann Hesse's (2003) *Journey to the East*. In my reading of the book, Hesse describes the essence of being a service-first leader. Liu (2019) stated that "servant leaders by definition put the needs of others first and in turn foster an empowering organizational culture for their followers" (p. 1099). Liu (2019) went on to state that "inspired by Hermann Hesse's Journey to the East, servant-leadership was proposed initially by Greenleaf (1970) as a way of life rather than a management technique" (p. 1100). Parents embodying a servant-as-leader attitude toward their parenting style can nurture their children to a more meaningful and purposeful life.

Servant-leadership is a form of leadership that resonates with many, and while reading about this concept, it has many pleasing qualities to contemplate and discern. When discussing two individuals who Greenleaf (2002) deemed servant-leaders, he stated the men "shared two inestimable qualities: the heart guided by great integrity and a profound sense of the mystical" (p. 262). This essence of integrity combined with the mystical is fascinating to me. I am attracted by this appreciation of the supernatural, along with the notion of being guided by the heart. In the book *Journey to the East*, Herman Hesse (2003) described Leo as a servant and an "unaffected man who had something so pleasing, so unobtrusively winning about him that everyone loved him" (p. 25). Hesse may be describing a mystical appreciation surrounding Leo, prompting whether this is the case with all servant-leaders.

An example of this mystery concept can be noted by listening to one of the great servant-leaders of our current time and space. Former President of the Philippines, Cory Aquino (2011), stated she found inside herself the ability to feel gratitude even while experiencing suffering as a critical quality to live. She gained this perspective as she watched her husband exemplify it while he was wrongly imprisoned. As I watched the video and processed Aquino's words, I regarded her position as mystical, mysterious, and full of integrity, which are qualities I saw in Leo. "A servant-leader's genuine love, empowerment, and concern for his followers' welfare, often results in incidents of unspecified willingness on the part of the followers to take on tasks that are beyond the call of duty" (Baykal et al., 2018, p. 38). Spangler (2000) conceptualizes the connection between mystics and parenting when noting, "To be a mystic is in many ways to be a parent, without the biological or legal connection to that which one is fostering" (p. 23). Spangler (2000) continues to describe mystics as knowing that there are deeper connections of relationship and pooled life that surpass biology,

law, and social society. These unions enlighten their nurturing spirit. "A mystic is one who fosters the shared soul and life of the world. For a parent, that shared life manifest in very particular ways as specific children" (p. 23). Spangler (2000) emphasizes that a parent is like a mystic devoted to developing the unfolding of the creation through the instrument of a family. A parent must, like a mystic, acclimate to what is not yet visible and to what is seeking to develop within the family or child. "In order to weave that spirit into the flesh and bone and behavior of children who as adults will delight in and contribute to the world at large" (p. 23).

SERVANT-LEADERSHIP IN THE CONTEXT OF THE FAMILY

According to Jennifer Miller (2017), "Parents, by the very nature of our roles, serve in a leadership position while we raise our children" (para. 1). Parents in this leadership role are the leaders within their organizational family. In my personal view, the family can be used as an example of an organization. Families are dynamic with multiple moving parts and cogs. Shafritz et al. (2005) noted the following about organizational culture:

> Organizational culture is composed of many intangible phenomena, such as values, beliefs, assumptions, perceptions, behavioral norms, artifacts, and patterns of behavior. It is the unseen and unobservable force that is always behind the organizational activities that can be seen and observed. (p. 352)

Adults in the family parent based on the culture in which the parent was raised. "Culture is to the organization what personality is to the individual – a hidden, yet unifying theme that provides meaning, direction, and mobilization" (Kilmann, n.d., Introduction section). St. Clair (2011) states that what one considers authentic in one culture may not be so in another (p. 23); how we as humans are socially constructed

directly impacts how we perceive the realities of one culture to the next. My personality developed over time and was cultivated from my shared experiences within the family that I was raised in, becoming the foundation from which I will grow and parent my children. As I have previously stated, servant-leadership can be a form of leadership that can help parents nurture their children. The servant-leader model can best be described and exampled in two ways. Greenleaf (2002) stated: "The difference manifests itself in the care taken by the servant first to make sure that other people's highest priority needs are being served" (p. 27). I am personally trying to integrate a servant as a leader in my current parenting skill set and attitude. At this point in my life, the only way I feel comfortable commenting on parenting is through self-responsibility. On this topic, Frankl (1984) stated:

> A man who becomes conscious of the responsibility he bears toward a human being who affectionately waits for him or to an unfinished work will never be able to throw away his life. He knows the "why" for his existence and will be able to bear almost any "how." (p. 127)

To apply Frankl's thoughts to parenting is to help people understand the importance of self-responsibility rather than blaming others. For example, to discuss and comment on someone else's parenting faults seems erroneous. Next, Frankl directed people away from the compulsion to ask what we should expect from life instead of orienting our lives around what life expects. Frankl then called people toward "right action" and "right conduct" (p. 122). Finally, Frankl implied life is ultimately about finding answers to life's most complex problems for the healthy parent. Parenting, I've discovered, contains many of life's most challenging issues, teachings, healings, and learnings.

One of these problems is the "tragic gap" Parker Palmer spoke of during a 2010 interview. "By the tragic gap, I mean the gap between the

hard realities around us and what we know is possible — not because we wish it were so, but because we've seen it with our own eyes" (Palmer, 2013, para. 1). As a parent, I can look for the tragic gap and approach my act of parenting through self-responsibility at a personal level. This task requires a bit of self-discovery and the ability to look inward through self-reflection and harness the power to name my faults through humility and grace. Ann McGee-Cooper et al. (2007) pointed out what she gleaned from her interactions with Robert Greenleaf, such as the "power of silence, reflection, and not knowing" (p. 17). Robert Greenleaf found power and strength in the realm of silence, reflection, and not knowing.

A parent can manage this position and close this gap by looking directly into social constructions for the answers. Characterizations of leadership and its many forms can be assumed as social constructions. Roberts (2007) further explained social constructionism:

> In contrast to modernistic thinking, the basic tenets of social constructionism suggest that there are multiple ways of seeing any given situation – one must be aware that others use different lenses and perspectives to see the same "reality" The meaning of an entity, organization, or event can only be derived through relationships and dialogues with others. According to social constructionists, language and conversation do not describe reality but create reality and give meaning. (p. 6)

These relationships and dialogues between parents and their children can become the cornerstone for optimism in developing positive outcomes within the family atmosphere. "An organization is a knowingly coordinated social unit composed of two or more people, which functions on a relatively uninterrupted basis to achieve a shared goal or set of plans" (Robbins, 2002, p. 4). The servant-leadership paradigm can help achieve these shared goals and plans within the family organization. "Extensive literature and research indicate that bonding is crucial for

adolescents' healthy development" (Lee & Lok, 2012, p. 1). Bonding is crucial and unique and can develop from the interactions between parent and child. The bond is a loving connection that is formed very early in one's life. hooks (2000) wrote that:

> . . . every separation in early life leaves emotional scars on the brain because they assault the essential human connection: The [parent-child] bond, which teaches us that we are lovable. This [parent-child] bond teaches us how to love. We cannot be whole human beings--indeed, we may find it hard to be human—without the sustenance of this first attachment. (p. 15)

Servant-leadership has the potential to help parents navigate through the bonding and attachment in the family dynamic of parenting. Sendjaya and Pekerti (2010) noted that servant-leadership generates trust in followers mainly through the behaviors of agreement relationships through close bonds with followers, thus highlighting the importance of the bonds formed between parents and their children. As hooks (2000) stated, these bonds formed between parents and their children teach us how to love. Children learn about love from their parents. Whether we come into this world as loving beings or not, "we learn about love in childhood. Whether our homes are happy or troubled, our families functional or dysfunctional, it's the original school of love" (hooks, 2000, p. 17).

Children learn from what parents teach them. "Parents and other caregivers are essential resources for children in managing emotional arousal, coping, and managing behavior. They serve in this role by providing positive affirmations, conveying love and respect, and engendering a sense of security" (Gadsden et al., 2016, p. 46). If parents want to change how they parent, this can be accomplished. Hacking (2000) stated, "To some extent, such tactics are generalizable: when we show that something is socially constructed, it becomes clear that it could be constructed differently, and then we can start to demand changes in it"

(pp. 6–7). Children often learn from how parents act and how to respond to certain situations by observation. In some families, it can be difficult for children to speak their truths or voice their opinions.

Greenleaf (2002) stated: "Only a true natural servant automatically responds to any problem by listening first" (p. 31). Listening is one of the ten characteristics Greenleaf (2003) recognized through his assessment of servant-leadership. Socially constructed servant-leadership allows the meaningful listening interaction between a parent and a child to begin. In some families, children spend time undertaking the listening instead of authorizing the freedom of asking the questions. "When adults' questions dominate adult-child conversations, we risk school children becoming masters at answering questions and remaining novices at asking them" (Dillon, 1988, p. 47). In some unhealthy families, children may not be allowed to ask questions. Eisenberg (1998) stated that parental reassurance of emotional communication had been associated with positive outcomes, whereas restriction of negative emoting has been linked with distress in young children. Parents can shut down their children's emotions and voices through their inability to listen and discern the emotional connection between them. Servant-leadership offers a parent access to a doorway for improved communication with their children, an entranceway where parents can serve their children, create an atmosphere where a child has a voice, the ability to communicate emotionally, and dialogue with safety.

Patterson et al. (2002) pointed out that human beings enter conversations with their own opinions, feelings, theories, and experiences about the topic at hand. This unique combination of thoughts and feelings makes up our pool of meaning. This pool not only informs us but also propels our every action. Patterson et al. (2002) emphasized, "when two or more of us enter crucial conversations, by definition, we don't share the same pool. Our opinions differ. I believe one thing, you

another. I have one history, you another" (p. 21). If you are experienced at dialogue, some do their greatest to make it harmless for everyone to add their meaning to the collective, even those ideas that at first glimpse appear contentious, mistaken, or indifference with their own beliefs. As the pool of shared meaning grows, it helps people in two ways. "First, as individuals are exposed to more accurate and relevant information, they make better choices. In a very real sense, the Pool of Shared Meaning is a measure of a group's IQ" (Patterson et al., 2002, p. 21). The greater the common pool of meaning, the more possibility of better and more effective decisions. "When people openly and freely share ideas, the increased time investment is more than offset by the quality of the decision" (Patterson et al., 2002, p. 21).

The family unit is an excellent arena for dialogue, developing shared meaning, and socially constructing a positive culture. Parenting as a servant-leader is a tremendous responsibility that can be a foundational platform for the family unit's development and construction. Tilghman-Havens (2018) stated, "If deployed holistically and adopted with an eye toward positionality, servant-leadership has the potential to make a major contribution to healing the injustices that divide our nation and world" (p. 88). I would push this quote a bit further, and state positionality through servant-leadership has the reasonable possibility to heal the injustices that divide families, both immediate and extended. This notion of positionality is interesting, and I am encouraged to focus on parents and their children's relationships. We all have position and positionality in our lives, and I suggest that this positionality changes based on the multiple influences one may encounter through life. As I sit in silence, self-reflect, and open myself to the mysterious, I am transferred to a place where I am forced to look directly at my positionality and faults. Reynolds (2016) pointed to Ferch (2004) in his essay on servant-leadership, forgiveness, and social justice, noting "that the human

capacities to discern one's faults, to seek and grant forgiveness, and to heal relationships are central ideas of servant-leadership" (Reynolds, 2016, p. 41). This points to the nature of servant-leading the self that not only requires the ability to serve others but the ability to know one's faults, own the essence of humility, and seek and grant forgiveness from others. As a result, the servant-leader can be better positioned to tangle with the tragic gap between parents and their children.

CONCLUSION

Parents who become mindful of their socially constructed framework around parenting in the family dynamic can begin to see their influence on their children. Lock and Strong (2010) stated, "At the heart of this debate are conceptions of people shaping or being shaped by their social surroundings or their embeddedness in others' lives" (p. 187). Parents are rooted in their children's lives, as servant-leaders are deeply rooted in the lives and wellbeing of their followers. In my experience, love, empowerment, and embracing the mystery of parenting have led to the lessening of fear within myself as a parent. Parker Palmer (2010) described a leader's role as one who can design circumstances toward positivity rather than the opposite of negativity. Servant-leadership has this quality. The positivity of parenting begins once parents can operationalize the role of a servant-leader by adapting the many positive foundational attributes in the servant-leader paradigm. Palmer (2013) recognized that fear paralyzes the mind, and to be a great leader (or one could say servant-leader), one must acknowledge that fear is around us and in all of us, acknowledge this and lead in a way that loosens this fear to allow for a more constructive outcome. Servant-leadership can soften the anxiety within a family as it uses a service-first mentality to close this gap between parents and their children.

Palmer (2013) provided examples of this by pointing to a "good" parent, one who can hold the pressures and tensions, standing in the tragic

gap of their children to help them through the ups and downs of life and living. Doing this without solving their problems for them or not allowing them to experience pain. This tragic gap can be detected within the family and parenting paradigm at the personal, organizational, communal, and global levels. The bridging of the crack can take form at the individual level through how I raise and parent my children and expanded to the organizational (family), communal (extended family), and global levels. "The servant-leader has the potential to heal one's self and others" (Crippen, 2005, p. 6). In this same way, a parent has the potential to heal themselves and their children. As Elder-Vass (2012) stated, this is a norm circle, "a group of people who are committed to enduring and enforcing a specific norm" (p. 15). Parents shape and are shaped, consciously or unconsciously, through their children's engagements and interactions. This influencing is an ongoing process that permits the power of servant-leadership to transfer through us in incredible ways.

More research can be done on servant-leadership and parenting. Wisdom can be found in the spaces where children feel most comfortable asking questions. Parents can feel meaning through joy, sadness, laughter, and love when engaging in safe dialogue with their children, where the answer is not the reward but the process in which it was found together. "If social constructionism is to be plausible, we need an account of how social construction works, an account that is consistent with our understanding of the material world of which we are part" (Elder-Vass, 2012, p. 20). Social construction is plausible and can be a beginning point for a servant-leadership parenting style. "The consequence is that we can reflect and decide what exists independently of any particular socialization, but that the workings of that capacity are influenced by our knowledge, beliefs, and dispositions, which alter according to our experience" (Elder-Vass, 2012, p. 18). In my life, my experiences have changed the way I parent, along with my

understandings and attitude. Parents are continually being shaped by family, friends, coworkers, communities, and the world. Parents can use servant-leadership as a foundation to build upon as they engage their children in the family element. Knowing that we are socially constructed beings creates a beginning point for parents. It can lead to the possibility of changing how they were initially socially built to a newer version of themselves that will benefit their children and family as a whole.

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Blaze Burnham grew up in St. John Washington, and lived two miles south of Pine City with my father, mother, and sister; Mike, Dixie, and Kasey. From this I gained the much-needed perspective of living in a farming community. Basketball and the inherent nuances of leadership in environments of intensity, rising from the basketball experience, became a significant life passion. I played college basketball at Walla Walla Community College. I then attained a BS in Nursing at the Intercollegiate Center for Nursing Education through Eastern Washington University, and later earned a MS in Nursing from Gonzaga University. I worked at Whitman Medical Group in Colfax Washington as a Nurse Practitioner for twelve years until 2010 when my passion led me to the Athletic Director position at the Liberty School District which is enjoy for nine years. I continued to work as a NP in the Spokane Valley one day a week for Vital Care Northwest. I am also pursuing my PhD in Leadership Studies at Gonzaga University. I attribute my own love for people, landscape, and the divine possibility of the human heart to my wife and children, Cheri, Match, Chase, and Maisie. My wife Cheri is a bright shining star in the sky of loving and purposeful wives. My children are gifts from God, and with their joy they heal the world.