

Wild Fruit

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Most woody nursery plants can be grafted or budded, but both processes are labor intensive and require a great deal of skill. For these reasons [grafting and budding] can be expensive and come with no guarantee of success. The nurseryman must therefore see in them a marked advantage over more convenient propagation techniques to justify the time and cost.¹

Unlike when my parents euphemistically said they purchased me on sale at Kmart, my husband and I actually did get our children from a McDonald's PlayPlace, where they showed distinctive signs of having been formed from McNugget-clay paste, salt, and ketchup. The older boy, a five-year-old dynamo, was high powered, fast talking, and quick, but he wasn't childlike. He was a T-Rex, or so he rasped over and over from his perch on the play structure before shaking the tenuous plastic or bounding on top of the tube slide and jolting the riders inside. Brother, an observant two-year-old, was almost imperceptible compared to the full-tilt T-Rex, a quality he took full advantage of when he slipped out of the restaurant under cover of Jurassic chaos. When someone finally noticed and brought him back, the little boy impishly smiled as if to say, "There's always next time," and with his proximity to the house-on-fire T-Rex, he knew it was true.

1. Ted Bilderback, R. E. Bir, and T. G. Ranney, "Grafting and Budding Nursery Crop Plants," NC State Extension Publications, June 30, 2014, <https://content.ces.ncsu.edu/grafting-and-budding-nursery-crop-plants>.

As we got to know these children better in the weeks and months that followed, the older boy revealed impressive skills in the art of fit throwing. I witnessed a memorable display in a Ross Dress for Less checkout line where he threw himself down spread-eagle and ominously yelled his demands. Everything, including property damage and bystander casualties, was on the table. Similarly unforgettable was an explosive fit over a piece of pumpkin pie where T-Rex cleverly lured my husband into the garage and locked him in; during the time it took my husband to escape, the entire pie went down.

Brother had a different set of skills, but they were no less terrifying. He had a charm that melted your heart, yet it was jarringly indiscriminate. In the park, he would approach strangers about money or candy with unbelievable success, or he would join other families' picnics, unbidden. He sweetly made us feel special just long enough to cozy up on our laps and eat our entire lunch before pivoting and focusing his charm on the next sap with a full plate of food.

These alien inhabitants from McDonald's PlayPlace never slept and were never still. They were beyond busy and had no sense of boundaries or civility. They pulled down the Christmas tree and threw crystal in anger, shattering the window. They were driven to move, break, touch, jump, slam, hit. There were no games or friends that couldn't be broken or manipulated. If an organized activity were over and another hadn't begun, the dervishes would again begin to whirl as if their lives depended on it. Had I not been under water myself, I might have considered why.

I vacillated between feeling a cavernous loss and a sleep-deprived rage: my husband and I had no prior fostering experience (to say nothing of general parenting), and the social worker had assured us that we could give her a call if this placement didn't feel like a fit; it was, after all, our very first placement. When we tried to follow up with her weeks later, we learned she was no longer with the agency, the children were from another state, and we had limited options aside from dumping them across state lines; even so, wild branches were overcoming the roots. I prayed to God over and over for deliverance. I pondered the clear message he had given me during our last IVF treatment: our embryos would not produce a full-term pregnancy, but we should not fret because something good was coming. This did not feel *good*. It felt like a lump of crazy-making coal.

After six months of classes, books, and parent-child interactive therapy, I asked my doctor to refer me to a counselor. My doctor wondered aloud if I might be better served by going back to my old lifestyle.

I wasn't exercising or sleeping well in this phase, and my health and work were suffering.

"People will take these children," she assured me. "You need to focus on yourself right now. There are people who will do this," she said.

"What people?" I asked.

"You know," she said, "the kind of people who do this."

The only person I knew who might do this was Jesus, but I didn't know where he was. I needed to figure out if my husband and I were people who *do this*, and right then I didn't know. To make matters worse, I had felt T-Rex and Brother digging into me, sucking hard for sustenance. They didn't want to need me, but I could feel them desperately hoping that I might be what I claimed to be: a safe, stable adult.

I remembered teaching T-Rex to pray during his first night in our home. As I knelt by his bed, I asked him if he had ever heard of Heavenly Father, or God. He said no in his husky voice, and it never occurred to me that this rasp was vocal damage due to years of screaming for basic needs. He listened when I explained who God was. "We can tell him anything," I taught. "He hears us and loves us, and he can help us with our problems."

Some weeks later, a student from the local university rang my doorbell. I visited with him for a short time on my doorstep while my kids ran amok inside. He told me about the Great Pacific garbage patch, a huge collection of floating small plastic particles in the middle of the Pacific Ocean caused by human pollution. He wanted me to attend a meeting to discuss ways to help clean up our planet.

"Don't you care about our world?" he asked. He wasn't being accusatory; he was simply passionate about his cause.

I paused for a few seconds, and then I briefly told him about the two boys I was fostering—two among hundreds of thousands who needed care—and it became evident that we were both trying to clean up enormous world messes against impossible odds. Still, my choice meant I couldn't attend his informational meeting (or hundreds of other worthy things) later that week. Even so, I was touched that he had tried.

As the months went by, we took the boys camping. My husband taught them how to fly fish, and T-Rex became a Cub Scout. He made a pinewood derby police car, and the motto "be prepared" suited him well. When other kids came prepared with a compass or a map, he came with hypervigilance, with a brain that not only saw potential danger but also incessantly scanned the world for every possible dangerous scenario that could ever be.

As required by our pack, I read aloud to T-Rex from the Cub Scout training manual on abuse, and it was at that moment when I first knew, in my bones, that this boy had not been created *ex nihilo* in McDonald's. When I read the definitions of neglect, emotional, sexual, and physical abuse, T-Rex's behavior bore witness that every cell in his body understood those words: he had been cut out of a blighted tree, and he knew the diseases well. Furthermore, even though his words could not adequately relay what he had been through, he wanted us to know his story. I became aware of a new language with an unfamiliar syntax and vocabulary, yet once I discerned the rhythm, I could never not hear it again. I still hear it, faintly or loudly, to this day in the grocery store, on the street, in my ward, and with strangers and people I have known for years. It whispers of traumatic, invasive events that forever alter the brain and psyche.

And it was in this language that I first heard T-Rex. Someone had tried to teach me this in the brief foster training we had done before the boys came to us, but prior to this moment it was meaningless, like trying to teach premortal spirits about binge watching Netflix or what Mentos taste like. Most languages have hundreds of symbols that connect with corresponding referents, but in the language of complex trauma, there is only one stunning referent for millions of symbols: "I have been hurt in such an extreme and devastating way that nothing short of the full expression of the Atonement of Christ can ever make it right."



I first saw a lemon tree growing grafted limes and oranges on a trip to Southern California when I was eleven, and all I could think about was how weird it was. I didn't find it fascinating or interesting, and I certainly couldn't understand why my dad's friend, the hobby horticulturist, was so taken with this Frankentree. It seemed unnatural and freakish. But then again, maybe I just didn't understand his reasons for wanting to try. Similarly, at eleven, I didn't understand the family in our ward who had adopted two children from Cambodia. It seemed very hard, harder than I thought it should be. But today I am deeply moved by grafted trees.

My husband and I took the boys on an interstate pilgrimage to Utah and picnicked at the Murray City Cemetery. In the last years of his life, my grandfather had tenderly, if a bit eccentrically, arranged to move the buried remains of several immediate relatives from other locations in the Salt Lake Valley to this central place. He wanted them all to be together. He

erected a great monument to them complete with genealogical lines and names carved in granite, including the name of my living mother.

“Look, that’s our family!” T-Rex said as he saw the connection. I nodded evasively. At that point my children and I lacked any official binding status, but I knew that my grandfather, who knew no strangers, would have been fine to squeeze my two boys into his already overcrowded plot. On that hallowed ground with those two tender scions, I perceived a surge of strength. I thought of my grandmother’s great-grandmother Nancy Cook, who became the fourth wife of William Vaughan Morris in 1862. I don’t have any idea what led her (or any young woman) to marry under those circumstances, and it seems a very hard life to choose, but something about it must have felt important to her, and because of that, for that moment, her unorthodox family tree buoyed me in mine.

Sometime after our Utah trip, a police detective came to visit my husband and me. He informed us that a biological relative with whom my boys had lived prior to our placement had recently been convicted of numerous counts of child abuse. This offender was now locked up and would be for decades. We told our oldest son this in hopes that it would help him feel safer. It didn’t. For years thereafter, he still asked us to check his closet or outside the window to verify that this abuser wasn’t lurking. At our therapist’s suggestion, we bought alarms and security equipment. We established a family safe word. We made safety plans galore with fire routes, earthquake drills, weighted blankets, and cozy corners. We sang lullabies and did guided meditations on feeling safe.

Ultimately, though, none of this would get to the heart of why my son didn’t feel safe. He didn’t feel safe because the world is mad. He had personally witnessed how disturbing it could be. There may be some places that feel safer, like hopefully our homes or the temple, but Eliza Snow’s secret something that whispered “you’re a stranger here” is correct. This place is no heaven. We have been sent to earth, in part, to notice the difference.

But, external dangers were only part of it:

“Mom, can I ever change my DNA?” T-Rex was getting older, and he had just finished a science class.

“Why would you want to change your DNA?” I knew why he was asking. He perceived rotten rootstock as part of his genetic code; he also felt simultaneously pulled and repelled by those natural roots. He had been forced to eat genuinely evil fruit, and it had become a part of him. In trying to make sense of his pain, he had hurt countless others in the name of self-preservation. “Kill or be killed,” his subconscious had told him.

“Do you think I’m a bad kid?”

“I don’t think there are any bad kids, only bad behaviors,” I said, giving my standard answer. It had taken several years of listening to T-Rex through the language of complex trauma, but I had heard enough to know him to be a sweet boy with a good heart; nevertheless, he was also tempted and haunted in atypical, devastating ways. These deviations promised—to his mind at least—strange relief from the constant abyss of shame and guilt that he carried for someone else’s sins. His ironic badge for passing through the hell of childhood abuse would be relentless and pervasive thoughts of worthlessness and discomfort. I had been impressed to see how very much like the Savior he and other victims of complex trauma would be required to be—despised, rejected, and innocently made to suffer anguish of body and mind because of others’ misdeeds.

I marveled at T-Rex’s faith. But even more, I marveled at his faith requirement. I had been born to loving parents who cherished me, so it was easy for me to reason that heavenly parents would too. T-Rex’s early experiences told him that he was unworthy of love. Thus, for him to see things “as they really are, and . . . really will be” (Jacob 4:13) would require not only faith that “God so loved the world” (John 3:16) in general terms, but T-Rex would need to develop faith that he was unconditionally cherished by God—an idea that ran counter to his experience and thought patterns; he would need to deliberately choose to believe in the face of what he perceived as preliminary evidence to the contrary. His approach to this challenge made me wonder if perhaps Heavenly Father, knowing of the extraordinary faith challenges that can accompany traumatic experiences, chose especially noble and great ones, like Abraham, to negotiate abusive families. It also made me wonder how many other languages were out there that I couldn’t yet hear.

Later that year our family traveled to the Salt Lake Temple to be sealed, and my husband and I weren’t above offering a chocolate incentive to help the boys behave during the ceremony. T-Rex was struggling. He had a fear that my husband and I would get to the altar and say, “No way, not this kid!” He also understandably felt conflicting loyalties regarding his birth family. Thinking of my grandfather’s monument, I told T-Rex that if his birth family would be willing to keep Heavenly Father’s laws, I would be happy to have them join our motley band; we also let him know that he could choose for himself up until the moment the sealer asked him whether or not he wanted to be sealed to us. This seemed to put his mind somewhat at ease, but it made it a bit of a nail-biter for the rest of us.

To add to this excitement, our sealer was discursive and had intermittent cognitive issues; our forward progress seemed uncertain. I was very aware of the boys' typically short attention spans, and after three repetitive loops in the sealer's story, my husband and I traded glances. Between this and not knowing T-Rex's *final answer*, we couldn't stop from smiling—laughing almost. It wasn't irreverent or anything; in fact, it was just the opposite. It felt providentially tailored to reflect our family: beautifully screwball—the sacred magnanimously gracing our best (often pathetic, mortal) efforts. And in the end, it was lovely.

Later, over chocolates, we talked about Jacob 5 and the allegory of the tame and wild olive trees. We focused on the good fruit that our boys, these wild branches, can bring into the world if they will lean into the strength of the tree. We also discussed that their fruit would not necessarily resemble mine or my husband's, but if they would do good in their own ways, it would please the Lord. As I opened my scriptures to further make my point, my eye caught a line that I wasn't expecting in verse 18. I had anticipated reading in that verse, "because of the much strength of the root thereof the wild branches have brought forth tame fruit." But instead, this zinger that followed hit me squarely between the eyes: "Now, if we had not grafted in these branches, the tree thereof would have perished."

It has now been nearly nine years since we first met our boys in the McDonald's PlayPlace, and last week our family spent the afternoon tubing and fishing to celebrate. It was a lovely late-summer afternoon, and my husband encouraged me to tube a stretch of whitewater that he knew would challenge me. When I got to the bottom after a thrilling, bumpy ride, I made an impulsive dismount, and in my haste, I found myself literally between a rock and a hard place; moving one way or the other threatened to send me swiftly down the river. I wasn't in mortal danger, but I was stuck. I signaled to my boys who had been fishing nearby with rods and nets in tow. When they heard my call, I watched my sons, full of concern and love for me, immediately abandon what they were doing and come to my aid. I smiled as the words "they straightway left their nets" flashed through my mind (Matt. 4:20). At that moment, it was hard to imagine sweeter fruit.

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