

Comfortably Numb...?

TRUTH IS ALIVE

As a father it was the hardest thing I've ever had to do. I guess I'd feared it might happen, sometime, with one of the boys. But in truth I'm not sure I ever thought it really would happen, and of course, when it did, it was a bit of a shock. I always knew they might want to leave home, but I have to say I never thought it would be like this. And as with all teenagers, they've said some pretty difficult things to me at times. Some of them have been pretty hard to take, but this time it was different, it was as if he said he wanted me dead – and by any standards that's pretty hard to take – shocking in fact! “Give me the money so I can go and lead my own life!” That's what he said. In truth he had no right to ask for it and all my friends told me I was a fool to let him have it. But here's the deal as far as I saw it: sure it was risky, but I want my boys to love me out of choice not cause of any other reason. I could have forced him to stay, or take the risk and let him go. The risk was huge: he'd probably mess up and lose all the money; my reputation would be shot; my future gone. Perhaps the biggest risk of all – he might never come home, but I hope my love was big enough to love him through everything, anything.

I was devastated when he went. I had nightmares about what might happen to him. There would be those who would try to exploit him, there would be those who would try to harm him and use him and it was all way beyond my control. My mind was full of questions everyday: where is he? What's he doing? How is he? Who's he with? Has he got a job? Has he any friends? Where's he living? Is he eating enough? There wasn't a moment I wasn't thinking about him, worrying about him, wishing I could be there with him making sure he was OK.

I know I must have looked foolish but I couldn't help looking out for him everyday. Everyday I found myself walking down the road – further and further – just in case he was coming home. Oh how I longed to see him on the horizon – walking

towards me – coming home. Everyday the tears would fall – I couldn't help it – I love him so much. Its not that I want to be overprotective or to stifle him or just to do what I say. But I do want him to know he doesn't have to do anything to prove himself to me – I love him anyway, and nothing he does or doesn't do is ever going to change that. I love him because he's my son – that's what I want him to realise.

I'll never forget the day I saw him, some things in life are simply unforgettable. At first I wasn't sure – he was just a speck on the horizon. I'm not really sure how my legs knew it was him before my eyes did – but suddenly I was running down the road. You know there are moments in life when you simply don't care what anybody else thinks of you – and this was one of them. I'm actually quite well respected in the community but here I was tossing all my dignity aside – running. Showing my legs, and I didn't care, I simply didn't care what anybody thought. Here was my boy – coming home – and I wasn't going to miss this for anything or anybody. He was a mess – but you know what I didn't mind that.

He gave me some speech about working his way back into favour but I wasn't having any of that – he's my son and he's home. All those days of agony, all those tears, all those moments of wondering and worrying – all worth it! My boy had chosen to come home. You simply have no idea of the emotion he stirred in me. My boy, the one who arrogantly, rudely took himself off, said he didn't want me around anymore, wished I was dead, being embraced by the father who'd always loved him. The son I thought I might have lost, the one I thought I might never see again, home safe!

My boy, once again in the place where I can fully embrace him. Risky love is not easy but it is so worth it when my son comes home. My love for him never changed – it was there all the time. I couldn't love him any more today now he's home than I could yesterday when he wasn't, and I won't be able to love him anymore tomorrow than I do right now in this moment of his return. Now he's home we can enjoy this love and enjoy all that we have for each other.

I love my elder son – the one who stayed at home – just as much, the tragedy is that right now he doesn't see things that way. I couldn't love him anymore than I

do – but right now he won't accept that. He's watched what his brothers' done and he's let resentment build up, and right now he's holding me at arm's length. I've tried to meet him where he's at right now – but he's having none of it. I understand his struggle – I understand it doesn't look very fair – a party for the one who fouled up, but he simply won't let me love him – and that's a tragedy. He's here with me, but he won't let me in, let me close, he can't enjoy all that we could share together.

So, sadly, he's standing outside, refusing to come in. How long I wonder will he wound himself in this way? If he would just step beyond.... he would see it is so, so differently. But I'll wait. I've waited for one son and I'll wait for the other. Who'd be a father? What they don't quite get is that I love them so much that if it was necessary, I would die for them. I would die that they might live, fully, openly, truly. If only they knew....

As a father, it was the hardest thing I ever had to do. I always knew it was a possibility, but to let him go was almost unbearable. We'd never been apart before, never separated this was new – for both of us. I knew it had to be, but that didn't make it any easier. And above all it was risky. I had to let him go, there was no other way – I knew that, I'd always known that, and I could only watch and wait. To trust him into the hands and lives of two teenagers to watch him grow and develop and learn how to live was well at times really difficult. My mind was full of questions: what would happen? How would they manage? How would he grow? How would others treat him?

He'd made his choice of course, he went because he wanted to, but we both knew the risk. He went to show them what I am really like.... not what they think I'm like. He went to show them how much I love them. It's been the hardest thing though. To watch how they treated him – how they ignored him, plotted against him, mistreated him and most stubbornly refused to listen to him. The times I wanted to step in and show them he was telling the truth. But I knew that wasn't

the way because they have to be able to choose for themselves. Love is only love if it's freely chosen, and I had to stand back and watch, and hope. But it was hard, and what happened was excruciating.

He went to love them and they hated him. He went to help them, but they stubbornly refused to let him. He went to set them free, but they chose to remain chained to their pride and hate. He went to give them life, but they refused to live. Then one dark day they took those hands of love, those hands that had healed and shown them compassion, and they nailed them to a cross. They could just as easily put an arrow through my heart. Here was the son I loved before the world began, cruelly, barbarically and crudely hanging from a cross of wood. What I wanted to do, what any father would have wanted to do, was to come down and rescue my son. I desperately wanted to protect him from the cruelty being inflicted upon him. I would have done anything to have taken away the pain.

He even pleaded with me that I do just that: "Father if there is any other way please take this cup from me!" But I had to stand back, to let the scene play out, because in my heart I knew there was no other way. Because I knew that his death would bring life for the people I so love. Because this was the way to win back the lost, because this would bring the ones I love, forgiveness and healing and wholeness. Because this would bring eternal life; because this was the only way to keep the dream alive; because this was the way that they could know me and I could know them.

Oh how my heart longs for this but as a father it was so hard to watch. I knew it was worth the pain and the emotion, and when he cried: "It is finished", what a moment that was! I was proud, so proud, he had given his life that others might live. "Greater love has no-one than this that he lay down his life for his friends." And raising him to life on that third day was simply incredible. Heaven sang, angels rejoiced, the cacophony of sound was magnificent, there was such rejoicing. My son, my son, well done, well done! He had left home and returned triumphantly and now a new way was possible.

Now my heart goes out to those he loved, those I love, those we love. I love them the way I love my son. Most of them, most of the time have no idea how much I love them. If only they could grasp what this Easter Day means for them. If only they could see my heart for them. They try all sorts of things to impress me, to make me love them, but I don't need any of that – there is nothing they can do to make me love them more. My heart is full of love for them, all I want is for them to open their hearts fully to me, to come into my embrace. Then we could begin to live, to live fully, together, now! Oh the things I have for them if only they would come into my love.

Some of them want to stand outside, they want to keep me at a distance, and I feel the pain of a lost son or daughter all over again. I just want them to come home, to come home to where they really belong. I know they are full of hang-ups and doubts and theories and failures, but we can work all that out together. If only they would come home. I'll wait, and I'll watch – however long it takes. My heart is bursting – I want to shout to them "Come home!" I try, but they just don't want to listen most of the time, but I love them, always, whatever happens. Oh, if only they knew.... if only they knew....

Preached at Crawley Baptist Church by Rev. Ian Phillips on 4th April 2010.