

The Family Friend



A collection of articles and quotes to aid your family in daily living.

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Safe Haven

by Norman & Ann Bales

In Numbers 35:10-12 Moses received these instructions from the Lord. "Speak to the Israelites and say to them: 'When you cross the Jordan into Canaan, select some towns to be your cities of refuge, to which a person who has killed someone accidentally may flee. They will be places of refuge from the avenger, so that anyone accused of murder may not die before they stand trial before the assembly.'" The cities of refuge were not safe havens for criminals, but for those who may have been responsible for a death they did not intend to cause. They eased the burden of the person who felt chased, hunted, and hated.

While we have no "cities of refuge" in our world today, we do have an opportunity to provide safe havens for those who have been wounded by life. In our years of ministry, we have been privileged to be associated with many people who have provided safe havens for those who have been threatened by life's cruelty. The people who make it possible for others to find shelter in the time of storm make a difference in the lives of people who have no other place to turn.

Sometimes, it may mean providing a place to stay until a person can get on his or her feet. Several years ago we visited in the home of a couple who owned a three story house. We stayed on the third floor. It almost reminded us of a dormitory. You never knew who might be coming to stay for a while. Some were travelers like us, and others were relationship casualties - people who were suffering from abandonment, rejection, and hostility. A lot of people got their lives turned around because they built a third story on their house.

We know others - families, church leaders, ordinary people who work forty hours and week. They provide a safe places for people who have nowhere else to turn. The people who knock on their doors may be battered women, alcoholics desperately seeking relief from their addiction, seriously ill people - who need encouragement that can't be dispensed with a syringe or a pill, people who lose jobs, etc. We know cancer survivors who offer hope to those who were emotionally devastated when they heard the dreaded "C" word in the doctor's diagnosis. The list of problems addressed by safe haven providers is as long as the list of human hurts.

We learned what it was like to need a safe haven several

years ago, when Ann underwent serious surgery following consultation with the doctors at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota. We stayed at a wonderful place called "The House of Compassion." It was our home away from home, and we were given great encouragement, often by those whose medical problems were worse than ours. Sometimes our fellow residents heard the words hope from the Mayo Clinic doctors, but just as often the best doctors in the world told them there was nothing they could do. We rejoiced with those who rejoiced and wept with those who wept. We were all family in that safe haven.

The "safe haven" mentality is even transferrable. When we look at our Christmas pictures, we are reminded of people who needed some place to go for Christmas ended up at our house. Now that all of our children are grown, and we're well past three score and ten, we usually spend Christmas with one of them, and they provide a "safe haven" for us, but it doesn't stop there. For the last three years in a row, we've spent Christmas with some of our children. It's never been just the kids and us. They are providing a safe haven for somebody else who doesn't need to be alone on what is supposed to be the happiest day of the year. Somehow our children think that's a normal way to spend Christmas.

Of course, there is a downside. It's possible to encourage co-dependency, and that's not good for the person who is attempting to express compassion, nor is it helpful for the one who receives it. We know of a church leader who sometimes refuses to grant requests that are asked of him. He may say, "I won't do what you're asking, but I'll stand on the sidelines and lead the cheers while you do it." Perhaps that's the ultimate blessing that can come from providing a safe haven.

To use a different metaphor, if we give someone a boost up the ladder, we may enable them to put their foot on the next rung by themselves. Maybe some of the people you try to help won't appreciate you. Maybe some will even steal from you. Perhaps there will be those who turn on their benefactors. The temptation is to stop offering safe havens, but when we do, we cheat ourselves as well as those who just might learn to climb up the ladder on their own, because we gave them an initial boost.

All people have certain safety needs. We lock our doors at night to protect our homes against uninvited intruders. Beyond that we make medical appointments to protect our health. We may lock our doors to discourage uninvited visitors, but within the family circle there needs to be an atmosphere of trust, that encourages openness. In our last newsletter we encouraged making our homes and churches safe havens.

Although it's important to find a safe place to shield ourselves from pain that's beyond our ability to bear through our own resources, there comes a time when we must leave our safe havens. Young birds don't appear to be all that excited about being forced to leave the nest, but they can't fly until they do.

Dr. Robert Brewer is a good friend and a professional leadership consultant. He has also spent many years in ministry. When we wrote about safe havens, Bob acknowledged the need for finding a place of security - a place where we can be open about our troubles and trust those who know our innermost secrets.

He also brought the other side of the coin to our attention. He observed that families often "... play 'hide and seek' --except that it's mostly hide---hide the truth, hide the shame, hide the embarrassment, hide the habits, hide the secrets ----all the while believing that we ARE safe because we have hidden the pain, the harsh reality we are ill-equipped to handle or too frightened to admit we can't handle it---or too scared to ask for help. Family secrets---the lies we tell because we haven't found a safe haven."

As we pondered Bob's insight, we began thinking about the importance of being willing to risk. We wrote about trust in our book *Affair Proofing Your Marriage: Preventive Maintenance*. (now out of print). An excerpt from the chapter entitled, "Are You Willing to Risk?" seems pertinent to our topic today. In the book, we described how we rebuilt our own marriage following the experience of infidelity. This excerpt explains why we were willing to risk further hurt in the hope of gaining greater security.

"Sometimes we meet people who have been painfully damaged by trust violations. They build protective shells around their emotions and shut the rest of the world out-including their marriage partners. While they may be able to avoid further hurt, they also pay an enormous emotional price in the process. The price includes loneliness, perpetual unhappiness, self-pity, and cynicism.

"Why were we willing to risk

further hurt in order to develop trust? We knew we couldn't live satisfying, fulfilled, and useful lives without at least taking the risk. If either of us had said, 'I'm never going to trust anyone again,' we would have set ourselves up for a lifetime of disappointment, and we didn't want to go there. We were also willing to look down the road and envision our lives as old people. If we had run the risk of attempting to build trust and gotten ourselves burned in the process, at least we would have the satisfaction of knowing that we tried. Had we not even tried, we would have always been haunted by the 'might-have-beens.'

"We cannot expect to achieve closeness with people unless we are willing to allow others to understand what we are like on the inside. Others must trust us enough to grant the same privilege. If we cannot trust one another in our marriage relationships, all of our other relationships will be negatively impacted. "Many years ago Howard and Charlotte Clinebell insisted, "Intimacy grows in a climate of trust based on commitment to fidelity and continuity" (*The Intimate Marriage*. (26). Guy Greenfield expressed agreement in his book, *We Need Each Other*: "Trust is openness and openness is the gateway to depth. Therefore, you go as deep as you trust" (33). The Bible speaks of oneness between husband and wife. "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh" (Genesis 2:24). Oneness without trust is a virtual impossibility."

—via **All About Families**, originally published in two installments.