TIMES AND SEASONS

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They came to us just before spring arrived, at the same time I began putting seeds into the ground in my garden. Lettuce, spinach, arugula. The ground was just getting warm enough to welcome some cool-weather plants and I had just planted seeds that morning. Simon was six years old and his sister Juniper right behind him, almost five. I had gotten a phone call two hours earlier that the Department of Social Services had removed them from their home. The placement would be for somewhere between three days and fifteen months. Could we take them?

Over the next several weeks, the garden greens began peeping up out of the ground, a bright, almost impossible shade of green that made me want to kneel down and munch on them straight from the soil. We also started to learn about Simon and Juniper: their individual quirks and dislikes, the way they spoke, what would trigger a tantrum, their complicated relationships. For the first week, they took turns getting up throughout the night and wandering around the house like pale ghosts, turning on every single light, while my husband and I wearily took turns getting up to send them back to bed, reminding them of their nightlights and the hallway light, and turning everything else off again. As they began feeling more confident in a new space, they asserted themselves in typically childlike ways like refusing to clean up a mess or rejecting the vegetables on their plates. They told us their opinions and their histories, sharing the narratives which had helped shape them. As my understanding of them grew, they moved from blank-faced strangers in my mind into complex and intricate individuals. Each of their bodies held an entire universe of history and possibility.

When my husband and I first started telling people at church we had been licensed and would begin fostering, most assumed it was with adoption as the goal, to add to our own three biological children. "Congratulations!" they would say, "How long before the children become yours forever?" We had to explain we weren't even considering adoption, just providing a safe place for a while. Sometimes it confused them. Mormons are so accustomed to planning for eternity that forming relationships that are meant to pass away feels foreign. Not for time and eternity. Not even for this earthly life. Just for a few weeks or months, a tiny fraction of mortality.

People frequently ask me how I can stand to say goodbye to the children. In some ways, this question confuses me. I don't experience the temporary nature of fostering as something bad—in fact, there's something beautiful in it. So much of the relationships in my life are built around the idea of eternity. The timeline of fostering acts as a counterweight to the heaviness of "forever" without losing any of the value of the relationship. It's like the work of caring for an apple tree compared to a squash. The tree will last for generations while the squash's lifetime is just a few months, but a good gardener nourishes both and values the fruit. When a child is in my home, I give them all the love and care that is in me. They are mine for a time. And yet they are not truly mine. No matter what they've been through, they always long for their real parents, the ones whose smell, voice, and touch are familiar. Their parents almost always long for them in return. The separation of their bodies is a grief beyond what I can imagine. It's so powerful it appears as a physical ache, like an almost-visible missing limb. It is a relationship I am only interested in supporting, not replacing.

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No one can care for a young child without getting to know the child's body intimately. As days passed with Simon and Juniper, I got to know their bodies while simultaneously watching them change. They

put on weight and their cheeks filled out. Their muscles grew stronger, and their hair grew thicker. As we taught them to use the toilet, bathed them, put on band aids, washed faces, brushed teeth, wiped their bottoms, applied sunscreen, cut their hair, and clipped their toenails, I came to know the soft parts of their skin. The places they liked being tickled and where they were too sensitive to touch. The infection in one toe. The cowlick on Simon's forehead and another at the nape of his neck. I can tell you which of his teeth have had cavities filled and what Juniper smells like in the morning. Although smaller than adults, children's bodies seem to take up much more space. They always need something: a drink, a snack, a bathroom, a tissue, a band aid, a nap. Their growth emphasizes the human condition of the constant renewal of each cell: as they inched upward, I thought about how bodies continually replace themselves, so that even the same body is not literally the same material after a time. Our stomach lining is replaced every three weeks. Red blood cells live only about four months. Every few weeks we have entirely new skin. Within just a few months of living with me, everything I could see in Simon and Juniper's bodies was completely familiar and also brand new. Our bodies decay and endure simultaneously.

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Some Mormons tell me that my relationships with my foster children will be forever, even though my husband and I are not sealed to them. "They'll recognize you in the eternities," these people say reassuringly. I rather hope that's not true. I like the idea that the children might forget this time in their lives, experiencing God's healing so completely that the memories of this period fade into nothingness. I have no scriptural or prophetic foundation for this, but something whispers its truth to me. Scripture tells us that God forgets our sins completely following repentance, which seems paradoxical for an omniscient being. How can a God who knows everything forget large parts of our lives? Similarly, I

hope a resurrected soul can retain the wisdom learned from life experiences while not being forced to remember the worst of what happened to them. That would be the kind of impossible equation an endlessly just and merciful divine being might offer. Maybe grace presents the opportunity to leave behind the parts of us that broke us open. Maybe those scars don't have to last forever, marking our bodies and souls with the memories of trauma. I think God loves us enough to allow some things to be temporary and simply pass away into the ether, sloughed off like dead skin cells.

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Juniper and Simon seemed drawn to my garden, as children often are. I firmly believe that time in that space is some of the best therapeutic healing I can offer anyone. As the summer wore on, the nightly salads were replaced with eggplant, cucumbers, green beans, and tomatoes. The children insisted they hated tomatoes and gagged when tomatoes appeared at the dinner table. They refused to let any near their mouths. As we harvested vegetables, I let them taste anything they wanted right off the plant. Basil, carrot greens, blackberries, and sour gherkins all went past their lips with various reactions. One sunny day, they popped bright red cherry tomatoes into their mouths and I watched their eyes get big with delight. After that, any time I worked in the garden, Juniper would wander around the beds shouting "Yum, yum, yummy!" as tomato juice dripped down her chin. The joy on her face filled me with gratitude for the divine gift of delicious and healing fruits and vegetables.

There are narrow parameters of what I can do for these children. I'm not there to fix them or heal them. Trauma runs deep and leaves its marks on bodies, especially little ones. The old idea of children being resilient and bouncing back quickly has made way for new research which informs us that trauma, particularly childhood trauma, affects us mentally and physically in unexpected and sometimes unacknowledged

ways.[1] A short time of stability and safety will not undo what they've experienced; they face a lifetime—possibly longer—of work in order to heal. I know what I cannot do, but I also know where my strengths lie. I can put seeds in the ground and nurture them into delicious food which helps Juniper's body and soul grow strong. In that moment of surprise and joy with the first tomato, the spiritual and physical realms revealed their inextricable intertwinement to me. Jesus showed deep care and concern for bodies in his miraculous healings of the wounded, sick, and hungry. While the power of spit and mud came from the man applying it to a blind man's eyes, the power of a tomato is inherent to itself. It is a perfect gift of God, formed from sunlight, earth, and water, that simultaneously offers temporal and spiritual relief.

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The children, particularly Simon, loved going to church and Primary. The Primary president told me he eagerly put his hand up to respond to absolutely any question with a loud, confident answer of "God?!" He quickly learned the Primary songs and asked for them at bedtime. His favorite was "Families Can Be Together Forever," and I wondered what went through his head when my husband sang it to him in Simon's dim bedroom in the evening. The words and ideas seemed both beautiful and jarring in his circumstances. Did the words about families being "so good to me" ring true to him? Did he long for a promise that he would be returned to his father and never leave him again? I never asked him these questions, but the look of peace on his face during the song gave me at least a few answers. Something in the lyrics felt healing to him.

The idea of a family that lasted forever clearly made a big impression on him, particularly after a Primary lesson about the temple. One day

1. Bessel van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score* (London: Penguin Books, 2014).

as we passed a field in which a wedding was taking place, he watched carefully for a few minutes and then sighed and said sadly, "Too bad they're not in the temple so they won't be together forever." I felt my heart break into a few more pieces as I considered the ramifications of the theology he had learned in my faith community. I told him I didn't believe in a God who would keep apart anyone in Heaven who loves each other. God is far too dynamic and compassionate for a limitation like that. "So, any family can be together forever? Even if they don't go to the temple?" he asked. I hesitated, not because I don't believe in the power of love but because I'm not even sure I believe in forever. "Yes," I said, looking down at him. "Forever." He grinned broadly.

I thought about that conversation again on the first cool morning of fall as I walked my dog in the early morning light. Simon had left our home the evening before and my whole body felt dull and heavy as I processed it. The house felt startlingly quiet and calm with only my own three children and Juniper in it, a reminder that each little body amplifies the burden of parenting exponentially rather than linearly. As I walked, I pondered about what passes away and what remains. Mortal bodies, a "frail existence," as Eliza R. Snow described them, seem more real and critically important than ethereal souls when I am doing the never-ending daily work of caring for them.[2] It's hard to believe they are what will fade into nonexistence while something we can't even see endures forever. I struggled that morning merely with the concept that only the weekend before, I had washed Simon's hair and helped him tie his shoes. I was his guardian, bound to him by a legal relationship a judge had ordered and society recognized. I was also tied to him through love, built over a million sacrifices and shared experiences. Forty-eight hours later, the law recognized no relationship between us and I had no influence over his life or even a right to know what happened to him next. Only the love remained.

2. Eliza R. Snow, "My Father in Heaven," Oct. 1845, *Times and Seasons* (Nauvoo, IL), Nov. 15, 1845, vol. 6, no. 17, p. 1039.

Sandy Solomon wrote in the final stanza of her poem "Spring Recalled in Spring":

> Love won't be reckoned in gain or loss;
> it was and yet it is.
> Across the woods the dogwood floats,
> giving itself away.[3]

I feel the power of a freely given and temporal love in sunlight, tomatoes, the changing colors of tree leaves, and a child's growing body. It was and yet it is. The divine equation will never be resolved in mortality.

A breeze and overcast sky, along with fading leaves and drooping plants, signaled to me that I'd be pulling out my garden for the year soon. The tomatoes which had started as seeds the size of a fingernail clipping six months earlier had grown into bushes eight feet tall, bent over with weight and losing their battle with a fungus. Putting a garden to bed for the season is as much work as waking it up in the spring. All the annuals are removed, cut up, and mixed into the compost pile. Over time, the plants decompose and return to the building blocks of plant matter: nitrogen, carbon, phosphorus, calcium, oxygen. Nature works so quickly that within a few weeks, the different substances are unrecognizable. A year and a half from now, I'll use the soil from that same pile to nourish lettuce seeds for a coming spring. It's almost like it fades away into nothingness and lasts forever, all at the same time.

3. Sandy Solomon, "Spring Recalled in Spring," *The New Yorker*, Oct. 18, 2021, https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2021/10/25/spring-recalled-in-spring.

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