

Christmas, Family Style

General

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It was a lifetime ago when I first found out I was going to be a father. Feeling an immeasurable sense of joy, and an equal sense of fear, I knew my journey had just gone down a path I could not turn away from. As Gayle and I traveled farther down the path to parenthood, we chose names, redecorated rooms, and started collecting the things necessary for raising a child. Anticipation mounted daily. There is nothing so full of hope as the arrival of a new baby. Babies are our future, and as long as there are babies, there is hope.

Human beings need hope. As the writer wrote so long ago - "a people without vision will perish". Simple truths are always the most profound. We all connect with birth, life, and death, because they are all human experiences. Christmas is about birth - Jesus' birth. And through his experience, he has given us hope in his resurrection.

The social and cultural pressures of Christmas separate us from the true reminder Christ gives us - "a baby being born is never the end, it is only the beginning of a marvelous journey that will change lives. It is also an experience that engages us. We cannot be mere observers and admirers, we must participate in the miracle. Parenting is full of maybe's, but it is never tentative, nor is it temporary. It is a never-ending source of joy, pride, hope and love, requiring constant care, an emotional roller coaster.

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Children seem to be an essential part of Christmas. In fact, they are able to capture the joy of Christmas better than adults, and it is through the eyes of my children that I, too, can remember the feelings I once had as Christmas approached our house. We had it all figured out. To ensure satisfaction, our Christmas lists were catalogued, literally! Each item on our lists had a reference to a specific catalog, with page number and item number. That way, there was no confusion, and hopefully, no disappointments. As we got older, our expectations of Christmas changed. We became responsible for performing the magic of Christmas, rather than just enjoying it. Yet, still inside of us is that little child, believing in miracles, tugging at our heart, wanting to feel the exhilaration!

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As the roller coaster moves along, you drop, screaming, from the height of anticipation to the depth of preparation. Being an adult has day-to-day realities of raising a family, of being grown up. You climb slowly to the top when the baby arrives and you hold that tiny bundle of joy and hope in your arms. Then, you match cries with the child as you plummet into the reality of 2 a.m. feedings and diaper changes. Life goes on, with its ups and downs, but you stay on this ride because it's the best ride there is. Being the parent, it can seem like we're always at the bottom, trying to climb up so we can enjoy the view and be exhilarated by the ride. Children always seem to be on the top,

the fun part of the ride. In reality, we are both going up and down, but we each focus on different parts of the ride. Family provides balance in many areas, and it gives us several vantage points “the eyes of age and wisdom, and the eyes of youth and energy. Which eyes do you choose to look through?

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Whatever set of eyes you choose to look through, being part of a family carries with it a set of responsibilities and values. Knowing where you came from, how you got here, and having some idea of where you're headed puts things in perspective. I do believe that each one of us needs to be a part of something, to fit in. We also need to feel special, to stand out. Trying to fit in and stand out at the same time can be maddening. Unless you have the strength of a family, you cannot be an individual. That is our gift to each other, from each other. Remember, no matter where we are, we have been moved ahead by someone who has made sacrifices to get us here. And we make those sacrifices for those who would come after us. Immigrants did not leave their countries to become Americans; they left to find a place where they could protect their heritage, to be true to their families and their values, to find a place where there was hope.

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And there you will find him: a babe, wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger.

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Merry Christmas, and congratulations, we're a family!

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Keynotes, December 1996