

# Swords of Blessing

This Father's Day weekend, my to-do list included personalizing almost three dozen wooden swords. A dear friend has a wonderful boys' summer camp called ["Warrior Week"](#) where men sow love and truth (along with a fair share of messy fun) into the souls of boys. I am privileged to use my calligraphy experience to letter each boy's name and a prayed-over character trait that is a blessing for each boy concluding his last year of Warrior Week. So I lettered blessings like "Justin the Magnanimous" and "David the Faithful" and "Cooper the Strong," under which was lettered "Dangerous for Good."



The camp leaders asked each boy's father to write a letter affirming his son, in his own handwriting, and walked them through what to say. Affirmation is a mystery for many dads, who never received it from their own fathers. "You can say whatever encouraging words you'd like to in your letter," the dads were told, "but we would like for you to at least include these four points:

1. I love you.
2. I am pleased with you.
3. I am for you/in your corner no matter what.
4. God has a plan for your life."

Wow. This is powerful stuff! I rejoice in the power of a father's words of affirmation because I have seen firsthand what a difference it makes in the lives of our sons. For all our gifts and strengths, women cannot imprint masculinity on the souls of boys and men. We can confirm what we see, but we

can't put it there. And a father's voice, whether spoken or verbal, can have a "weight of glory," to use C.S. Lewis' term, that lasts for an eternity.

While I'm thrilled for the boys who will be receiving this amazing blessing, I am also reveling in the truth that my heavenly Father delights to affirm each of us. He says, "I love you, I delight in you, I am for you, and I know the plans I have for your life!"

Even if we don't get a sword. . . at least we get the letter. It's bound in a Book.

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## Try Jesus???

The other day I saw a bumper sticker: "Try Jesus." *Try Jesus?* Whoever wrote and printed that soooo doesn't get it. They don't get Jesus, they don't get the Christian life, they don't get the relational aspect of biblical Christianity, they don't understand the Cross.

Try Jesus? We might as well print bumper stickers for plants that say "Try Light." Or for appliances: "Try Electricity." Or for pens: "Try Ink."

*Try Jesus.* The mentality of this thought permeates our culture, and even worse, it permeates many churches: Jesus as God's best self-help tool. Jesus as an addition to our lives, like vitamins or exercise.

The other day I was having a texting conversation with a young lady when I had reason to suggest that she was a functional atheist: claiming to love God but living and thinking in ways that are no different from an atheist. She said, "Sue, how can you say that? I have God in my life!"

I responded, "YOU have God in YOUR life. . . can you see how backwards that is?" God as an additive completely misses the point of why He made us, why He calls us to be reconciled to Himself. Not so we can "have us some God in our lives," as they say in the South, but so that we can join the love-fest of Father, Son and Spirit in an ongoing dance of friendship, fellowship and celebration.

Recently, I've been thinking a lot about the Trinity and how the Three-Personed God wants us to join in on Their party. It has impacted my prayer life: now, when I pray for someone, I envision her in the middle of a divine group hug, surrounded by Father, Son and Spirit loving each other with the person caught up in the middle, getting "loved on" on all sides.

It's so much bigger, so much better than the puny "Try Jesus."

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## Turn to Jesus, Tiger

Yesterday (Jan. 5, 2010), Fox News commentator and analyst Brit Hume *became* the news with his delightfully provocative comments about and to scandalized über-golfer Tiger Woods, which instantly showed up in places like an entertainment "news" show and in several YouTube videos.

“Tiger Woods will recover as a golfer. Whether he can recover as a person, I think, is a very open question, and it’s a tragic situation. He’s lost his family; it’s not clear to me whether he’ll be able to have a relationship with his children, but the Tiger Woods that emerges, once the news value dies out of this scandal, the extent to which he can recover, it seems to me, depends on his faith. He’s said to be a Buddhist; I don’t think that faith offers the kind of forgiveness and redemption that is offered by the Christian faith. So my message to Tiger would be, ‘Tiger, turn to the Christian faith and you can make a total recovery and be a great example to the world.’”

I love it that someone spoke the plain, un-PC truth that Buddhism offers no solution to the weight of grief and shame that Tiger is carrying.

But Jesus does.

Our culture has become voracious in its appetite for celebrity and celebrity news, which is why a man’s unfortunate and self-indulgent choices to engage in numerous extramarital affairs gets much more attention that it deserves. This isn’t just about news that sells newspapers and magazines; this is a real life train wreck, with real life trauma and pain to a man and his family. And that’s why what we believe matters, because real life in a fallen world involves pain and suffering—some because of our own sinful choices, some because of others’ sinful choices, and some because pain and suffering is inextricably linked with a world hostile to God and intent on operating independently from Him.

Pain and suffering is not optional, but we have choices in how we interpret our experiences and how we respond. Brit Hume, himself a Christ-follower, knows that God can bring hope and change and redemption out of the most painful parts of life. He knows, because he is a man forgiven by God and others for his own sins, that there is freedom and relief in the

forgiveness made possible by Jesus' death and resurrection.

Tiger needs to know.

Would you join me in praying for the man, every time you hear or see him mentioned in the media? Pray for grace to repent and not merely grieve that he got caught. Pray that he turns to Jesus.

This blog post originally appeared at  
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## Vain Imaginations

Not long ago, I attended a retreat at which a college student, freshly discovering his call to an intercessory prayer ministry, spent hours every night praying by name for everyone on the retreat. The last morning when I ran into him, he said, "Sue! As I was praying for you, I received a word from the Lord for you."

Uh-oh. I'd heard this before. And every time I had taken it to the Lord, asking if there were anything to it, the answer was no.

My defenses up, I smiled and said, "I'm listening." He got a very thoughtful look on his face and said, "I have to get it exactly right. . . OK, the words were, 'Guard against vain imaginations.'"

I thanked him for this and promised to immediately take it to the Lord. I had barely breathed, "Lord, is there anything to this?" when the lightbulb came on in my spirit and I knew

EXACTLY what this was about.

Oh yeah. This was from God, all right.

For about a year, my husband and I had been carrying around an open wound on our souls. We had been deeply hurt by several people we had trusted and loved, and it is not exaggeration to call it traumatic. Every single day of that time I had engaged in fantasy conversations in my head with the people who inflicted so much pain—except they weren't really so much conversations as monologues, with me lecturing on how badly they hurt us and how dishonoring their actions were to us and to God. . . yada yada yada.

Vain imaginations. Yep, this word was right on the money.

And God was so incredibly tender and grace-ful to merely exhort me to “guard against” them. Not, “You bad girl, you’ve been sinning against my sons in your mind. Repent!” Not, “And who are YOU to set yourself up as judge and jury? Look at your own fleshly heart, kiddo!”

Just, guard against them.

So I confessed my sin of indulging in self-vindicating fantasy, and resolved not to go there again. It didn't take long, of course, before my mind returned to what had become a familiar and comforting indulgence—an emotional “binkie.” I stopped and said, “Well Lord, what am I supposed to do instead?” He didn't even have to say anything, just wait for me to connect the dots since I already knew. “Oh. I should be praying for them instead, huh?”

Okay. Fleshly sigh.

The biblical pattern for changing behaviors is to replace and displace the old with something new, and eventually the temptation to indulge in vain imaginations about this issue faded with disuse. It still pops up occasionally, but I know

what to do with it.

“Vain imaginations” is a good term for a lot of popular mental sin we so easily rationalize: engaging in internal arguments with people who aren’t even there, the lusting that accompanies sexual pornography for men or emotional pornography for women (steamy romance novels). We all spend time thinking about things that are empty, fruitless, and harmful to our spirits.

And we all need to guard against them.

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## Watching Transformation Happen

Last week I was privileged to attend the annual [Exodus Conference](#) along with a thousand people coming out of homosexuality, as well as some family members and people like myself who minister to them. Nothing has built my faith in the power and the loving heart of our life-changing God like my decade-long involvement in this kind of ministry.

I got to experience the power of answered prayer as I stood in worship with a divorced couple whom I have known online for several years but met at the conference. The husband had gone AWOL for the past year, choosing to pursue his feelings instead of his identity as a beloved child of His Father. He told me “something” kept drawing him back into the light: with

a smile, I told him that Jesus has His hook in his heart because he belongs to Jesus! And there he was, reconnecting with his God and his wife in worship and the beauty of repentance.

I got to hear the testimony of a beloved young woman, deeply wounded, whom I have watched soften and become so much like her Jesus over the past several years. As we were singing the words "Sin had left a crimson stain, He washed it white as snow," she suddenly and violently experienced the memory of being a sexually abused five-year-old, sitting in the tub with blood everywhere. In the pain of that moment, the Father met her there with the same words He had spoken to [Sy Rogers](#), that evening's speaker, about his sexual abuse: "Daddy sees, and Daddy's sorry." As His compassionate love washed over her, healing came.

And I got to see actual physical transformation in a dear lady with whom I have been walking out her repentance from lesbianism. As she has dared to believe that God really means everything in His word, especially about His love for her and how He sees her as a precious, beautiful, beloved daughter, change has come. She has gone to great lengths to drink in her Abba's love in intimate ways (and has taught me what that can look like in the process). Halfway through the week, she caught a glimpse of herself in a plate glass window and was amazed to realize that her posture had changed: she was walking more upright and confidently, assured that she was "a real person" (her words). At the end of the week, she said she believed the change in her was permanent and lasting. She finally feels solid, not hollow. That's the power of God's healing love.

And that's why it is such a joyful privilege for me to serve people whose thorn in the flesh is unwanted same-sex attractions. As their SSA drives them to Jesus, transformation happens.



And it is beautiful.

This blog post originally appeared at  
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## What I Wish I'd Heard Growing Up

I have the privilege of helping to moderate an online forum for women who struggle with same-sex attraction. One of the things that all the people in this ministry share is a history of hurtful relationships with their families, especially their same-sex parent. (With some of them, the major wound came from not connecting with their same-sex peers as they were growing up, but all of them have some level of difficulty with their parents.)

Someone started a discussion thread called "Things I Wish I'd Heard Growing Up." In addition to making my heart break, I thought this list, from a variety of ladies, was also instructive about what love sounds and looks like:

Ruth, you are beautiful. You mean the world to me.  
You are important in my life.  
You have a gift.  
I love you.

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We love you no matter what.  
We accept you no matter what.  
You are "perfect" in my eyes.  
You are beautiful to me.

I love you just the way you are!

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You are important  
I want you

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You are smart  
I love you (from my dad)  
God loves you just the way you are  
You are special to me  
You are worth everything to me  
I'd do anything for you

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We wanted you  
You are important  
Your feelings matter  
I won't drink/do drugs anymore  
Your dad loves you

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You matter.

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Something I wish I'd seen: my parents looking happy to see me.

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What would YOU like to do?  
I'm glad you're a girl and it's all right to be, 'cause it's safe.  
I don't need to touch you. I can just love you.  
You can fail and I'll still love you.

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No matter what happens to you, we will still love you.

You don't have to be perfect, we will still love you.

I believe you.

Don't ever be afraid to tell or ask us anything. We won't hate you or disbelieve you. We will do our best to help you. Even if we are afraid or nervous sometimes.

Something I wish I'd seen and heard: My parents praying with each other, depending on each other, being transparent with each other.

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I never met my biological father; he died two months before I was supposed to meet him. I always wish I could have heard him say he loved me and was proud of me. I wish I could have hugged him.

I wish my mom would have said, "Hey, let's spend some time together," and not have it be because she wanted to lecture me on something.

You are worth my time.

Let me do that for you.

You have done a great job (and not followed by a "but..." that wipes out what was just said)

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I wish I was told that I was lovable and likeable

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And here are mine:

I'm sorry you had polio. Tell me about what it's like to live with a handicap. Tell me what your heart feels about that.

You are not damaged goods, and you don't have to strive to prove yourself acceptable. You already are.

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*Lord, these are the cries of so many of our hearts. Let us hear You affirming us, loving us, singing over us with joy, telling us that You delight in us!*

This blog post originally appeared at [blogs.bible.org/engage/sue\\_bohlin/what\\_i\\_wish\\_id\\_heard\\_growing\\_up](https://blogs.bible.org/engage/sue_bohlin/what_i_wish_id_heard_growing_up) on April 14, 2009.

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## When We Forget What is True

*Sue Bohlin blogs about a conversation with a friend struggling with temptation because she had forgotten what is true.*

Sunday morning as I was getting ready for church, the phone rang. It was one of the women from the online support group I help moderate for those struggling with same-sex attraction.

“Hi, Em.”

“Sue, can you talk?”

“I have two minutes.”

“OK, then in two minutes tell me again why homosexuality is wrong? I’m at an AA [Alcoholics Anonymous] retreat and there are so many women here I could really connect with and they keep turning out to be gay. And the leader is wonderful, but she’s a former nun who is just so happy and content with her lesbian partner. I can’t remember why I’m supposed to be fighting against what I want.”

“Oh. Well, okay. . . [Lord, help! Give me Your wisdom here!]

Homosexuality is wrong because it's not God's plan. Because He created man and woman to be complementary to each other. Because two women can have a wonderful friendship but were never meant to meet each other's needs in that way. Because lesbianism is about trying to fill your heart by drawing from another woman's heart, but that one's as needy and empty as yours. Because two people of the same sex cannot possibly reflect the 'unity with diversity' of the mystery of the union of Christ and the Church, where two very different, very other beings are somehow one. Because it's two of the same, not two who are different, coming together as one. Because homosexuality is idolatrous—remember, it puts the other person, or what they give you, or the relationship on a pedestal where only God should be. Because when you give yourself to what God has called sin, it costs you the intimacy with Jesus that your soul craves.”

“Right. Right. . . . But Sue, it doesn't feel like it. The others here seem so happy and content, and I'm miserable.”

“I'm so sorry, Em. Fighting our flesh will absolutely make us miserable. You're doing the right thing. Don't give in! Ask Jesus for help! Press *hard* into Him!”

As I turned on the water for the shower, a scripture sprang into my head, full and insistent. I called her back.

“Got a scripture verse for you, Em. I think God wants you to grab onto this for all it's worth. 'There is a way that seems right to a man, but the end thereof is death.' Proverbs 14:12. Got it?”

“Got it.”

I am so proud of my friend for reaching out and asking to be reminded of what she knows is true but has forgotten why. What a great example of why we need community, why we need friends who also walk with Jesus, why God doesn't want us to be “Lone Ranger Christians.” *Lord, help me continue to surround myself*

*with people who will speak truth to me, especially when I am tempted to forget it!*

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on Sept. 9th, 2008.

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# Why Kids Leave the Church After High School

The [Youth Transition Network](#) has released the results of research about why 70% of students in high school youth groups have left the church within a year after high school graduation.

One big reason is the unrealistic expectations that our young people sense from parents and church authority figures. When asked, “What does it mean to be a good Christian,” students responded with a long list of do’s and don’ts, always and nevers:

- No sex
- No secular music
- No fun
- No profanity
- No bad attitudes
- Be perfect
- Be a virgin
- Be wholly devoted to God
- Be righteous
- Be a role model

- Don't doubt
- Have all the spiritual answers
- Always be positive
- Always be in a good mood
- Wear proper clothing
- Go to church all the time
- Always read your Bible
- Always be praying
- Know the whole Bible
- Get along with everyone
- Always be happy
- Never talk back
- Do not fail
- Do not fail
- Do not fail

Wow. And that's a PARTIAL list! If someone said to you, "This is what it means to be a Christian," would you want to sign up?

What's also heartbreaking is what ISN'T on the list:

Reveling in God's love for me

Appreciating His gifts of grace and mercy

Loving God back because I am so moved by His tender love for me

No wonder so many students live a "goody-two-shoes" Christian life on Sundays and Wednesday nights, and a completely other, separate life the rest of the week! No wonder they don't see the point of staying connected to a church once their parents stop making them go.

So many of our students feel that they can't be successful Christians. They think it's hopeless to live up to the expectations they sense. They think that being a Christian is just too hard.

Sounds like they need to be introduced to what grace looks

like. Sounds like they need to have it modeled to them. Sounds like the rest of us need to embrace it ourselves and live it out so they can see it up close and personal, and see why following Jesus is so much more than checking off the boxes on our spiritual report cards!

This blog post originally appeared at [blogs.bible.org/engage/sue\\_bohlin/why\\_kids\\_leave\\_the\\_church\\_after\\_high\\_school](https://blogs.bible.org/engage/sue_bohlin/why_kids_leave_the_church_after_high_school) on April 28, 2009.

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## Photoshopping Life

When Ray and I [visited the Galapagos Islands](#), one of my favorite pictures was the two of us with a gigantic tortoise. Unfortunately, my big ol' red purse was on the ground in the picture too. So I photoshopped it out.



At our son's wedding, one of the ushers wasn't wearing his boutonniere when it was time for the formal pictures. "Not to worry," the photographer said. "We can photoshop it in later."

During my daughter-in-law's holiday family picture taking,



someone suggested photoshopping in a beloved uncle, since they were missing him. “No! He’s been dead for two years!” someone else responded. “You don’t photoshop in a dead person who couldn’t have been here with us!”

We just had fiber-optic TV and internet installed. We can now pause and rewind live TV. Whoa.

The ability to manipulate digital images and sounds has spoiled us, I’m afraid, into thinking we should be able to manipulate the rest of life. It’s a technologically enhanced update of the enemy’s lies in the garden, enticing Eve to think she and Adam were entitled to be like God, a thinly veiled offer to make themselves as gods, just as he had.

And so we end up with people redefining things like marriage to include any two people, including those of the same sex. And a couple of gay men who successfully got both their names put on the birth certificate of their adopted son. This is the fruit of people redefining truth and reality according to their whims and desires.

And it is so much more serious than subtracting a purse or adding a flower.

This blog post originally appeared at  
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on January 6, 2009.

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## Poopy Messes

Recently a friend called with an urgent prayer request; she’d been summoned ASAP to her son’s private Christian school and

they wouldn't say why. She was concerned about her eight-year-old anyway because of some traumatic life situations they had been weathering, and she feared that maybe he was acting out because of how difficult his life had been.

Turns out someone had pooped on the bathroom floor and they had traced it to "Mark." They pulled him out of his class and had him wait for his mother in the principal's office. When my friend got there and found out what had happened, she said, "My son has occasional bowel problems. He's only eight years old. Why are you making a big deal about this?"

"Because," they replied, "he didn't tell anyone about it! He should have told someone! You don't leave poop on the bathroom floor! That's wrong!" They made it sound like he'd been caught stealing or setting the school on fire.

"Mark," my friend asked her son kindly, "Is there a reason you didn't tell anyone?"

In a small voice Mark answered, "I didn't know what to do."

My friend reassured her son there at the school and again when they got home, even though she was boiling inside at the insensitivity of the school personnel who made a scared little boy feel like a criminal for simply not knowing what to do.

What was missing was the awareness of a safe person he could tell "I messed up" without The Fear Of God hammering down on him. What was missing was any interaction with any adult with a kind face and a disposition of grace that understands that sometimes little kids make pooppy messes that paralyze them with fear, and it's okay. That we clean it up, give a hug, and you're on your way. What was missing was a grown-up who remembers that there's a difference between making a mistake and making a choice to be rebellious.

My heart hurts for little Mark and for Mark's mommy, both of whom desperately need to experience the grace of safe people

for both literal and figurative “poopy messes.”

So I’ve been thinking about what it means to be a safe person, a grace person.

It means first of all being in touch with our own messes and our own sinfulness and our own desperate need for a gracious Savior. It means delighting in receiving the grace and mercy of God, and being committed to passing that grace and mercy on to others. It means remembering that since we live in a fallen world, everyone walks around with an invisible tattoo on their forehead that says, “Please encourage me.” It means trusting God to shine His love and His grace and His mercy through our faces like so much light streaming through a stained glass window. It means remembering that everyone is still very much in process and a long way from our final form of glorified beauty and strength when Jesus is finished working on us.

It means that when someone makes a poopy mess, we set our minds on responding with “I’m sorry” rather than “shame on you.”

Because it won’t be long before we’re needing some grace for our own poopy mess. Again.

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