



PERMANENT MARKERS

SPIRITUAL LIFE SKILLS

TO WRITE ON

YOUR KIDS' HEARTS

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Foreword by Barbara Rainey

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Identity

Who Do You Think You Are?

My vibrating phone displayed the number that always caused my stomach to dip: the elementary school. And yes, the familiar voice of the vice principal informed me my son Jack had followed a couple of other boys in jumping on the urinals—the goal being, of course, to press the wall-mounted air freshener. (Sigh.) My son insisted it “just looked fun!” As all urinals must.

But later that night, my husband, John, wasn’t about to hand him a get-out-of-jail-free card. “I want you to come back to me tomorrow after you’ve thought about why that sounded like a great thing to do,” he said. John calmly asked questions. Would Jack have done this if he were alone? Was this a curiosity about physics or mechanics, or was this more of a game? Was Jack challenging himself to see how high he could jump?

The conversation was reminiscent of one with my daughter, years before. She was stinkin’ cute, sitting across the table in her pink “I Love to Dance” tee. Mattress-spring curls poked out from under her faux raccoon hat. Being cute has never been Corinne’s problem. It was what lay behind that smile

with those eight-year-old Chiclet-size teeth that lifted my brows. That sweet grin might as well have been plastered on the Hulk. When life, particularly involving her three brothers, didn't suit her, we all knew it. Shoot, the neighbors probably knew it. Her grin would flatten to a hard line; those brown eyes would arrow downward; that size-one foot would stamp. And she'd let her victim have it.

Now, I get that she's a girl with brothers. I get that the people we live with moonlight as chauffeurs to the funny farm. What I didn't get: What brought her to the point that she chucked all self-control? What was it about the way Corinne was wired that resulted in a mini Chernobyl?

Over time, the answers to my questions about both my children would materialize as I understood more about what composes our identity.

Dutch theologian and Harvard professor Henri Nouwen articulated three lies people tend to believe about their identities:

- "I am what I do." (My translation: "I want performance, power, or control.")
- "I am what others say or think about me." ("I want affection and respect.")
- "I am what I have." ("I want protection, security, control, comfort, and survival. I want family, possessions, reputation, safety.")¹

These lies can also be understood as attempts to fill holes—more accurately, bottomless pits—in our hearts. We're trying to fill those holes with performance, affection, or possessions. But only God's love fills the void. When any of us crave affirmation from others, the true desire beneath that desire is the infinite love of God himself.

I am personally prone to believe the second lie—that my worth lies in what others believe about me. My desire for approval—and control over that approval—almost thrust me toward an eating disorder in college. And still, today, my thirst for love too quickly compromises my authenticity with my friends and husband, occasionally melting me into passivity with my kids.

I suspected that one of the lies Nouwen articulates lay behind our struggles

with Jack and Corinne. So I examined what I knew about my children. Corinne grew angry when her world wasn't following suit with her desires and when her brothers slighted or overpowered her. And from the age of four, she often utilized her excellent people skills to manipulate others. As my husband and I continued to talk, themes of control and power rose to the top of Corinne's desires. She believed that first lie: She was what she did. And the third: She was the control or power she maintains in our family.

Jack, on the other hand? My son loves fun because he loves stimulation. He also craves attention; he loves being popular and funny. Like his mom before him, he was falling victim to the second lie.

Author Paul David Tripp writes, "Identity amnesia will always lead to identity replacement."² When we forget whose we are, we attempt to replace the Object of our worship. And our children's actions and attitudes will always reflect what—or who—they put first.

The Deeper Why

Our kids need our help—in the form of wise questions—to see the desire beneath their desires, sucking holes in their souls. It's why this chapter stands first: If we, adults and kids, don't have a solid identity in who God says we are because of Jesus, trying to develop spiritual life skills will be only an attempt to sate our own hungers.

So let's ask, *Why does my daughter want to join cheerleading? Why does my son need "those shoes"? Why is my kid breathing into a bag when he doesn't get an A? Why did my girl make fun of the immigrant in her classroom?*

The answers are rarely as black-and-white as we think. Usually we're motivated by a mix of legit desires ("I want to have fun!") and illegitimate ones ("My desire to be popular is stronger than my impulse control, so I jumped on a urinal!"). Careful discernment helps us and our kids separate the pixels of what's black, what's white, what's gray: legitimate desires, illegitimate ways of meeting them, and a good mix of both.

Whether to a seller of purple cloth or a cluster of intellectuals at Mars Hill, Paul

both hears the central questions of their hearts *and* affirms them: *Yes, this longing you feel is legitimate*. At Mars Hill, that sounds like, “People of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious” (Acts 17:22). Paul responds then by exposing the ways God says no to the illegitimate ways a particular audience attempts to meet those needs.

Often we seek to fill our bottomless soul holes with what the Bible would label as *idols*. They wedge themselves between us and God, diverting our worship from him. I think of C.S. Lewis’s famous description of our misapplied cravings:

It would seem that Our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.³

I want more than mud pies for my kids and myself. My own holes—like my clawing for others’ approval, my insatiable appetite to be significant and to achieve—are behind some of the worst decisions I’ve ever made. They have found me to be both a self-loving coward and a finger-jabbing hypocrite. They’re behind the fights I pick with John, the words I hurl at my children, and the disdain I cherish in my heart.

Our soul holes determine a lot of our lives.

As I looked at Corinne, I suspected that under that mass of chocolate-brown curls and Davy Crockett hat, my daughter’s mind was wrapped around an eight-year-old’s idea of power. Practically, I needed to direct her away from the spiritual equivalent of an M&M’s sugar high (*Control your brothers! Dominate the competition! Be the family star!*) and point her toward the Living Water.

Years later, I’m still gently seeking to open those brown eyes to the base needs that nourish her spiritual hunger and thirst, unfolding the difference between the dry wells she keeps hoeing out for herself and the Living Water for every true thirst:

My people have committed two sins:

They have forsaken me, the spring of living water,

and have dug their own cisterns,
broken cisterns that cannot hold water (Jeremiah 2:13).

If I can locate and identify the leaking wells my kids dig, it's easier to point out these wells' fissures—the ways they don't hold water. And I can remind her of who God says we are because of Jesus's love-driven death. This death closed the distance sin created between us and God and gave his resounding answer to Nouwen's three core lies of humanity. Listen to how God defines our identity:

Jesus has done enough.
God accepts us because of Jesus.
In Jesus, God gives us everything we need.

The Gospel for Your Child

You can see now why every spiritual life skill rests on this one. Identity is about *kids internalizing the gospel, God's all-the-way love, as their source of worth* rather than in finding their identity in what they have, what they've done, or who people say they are.

Until their self-worth is firmly rooted in Christ, even in prayer or devotions they could be attempting to prove themselves, like the Pharisee in Jesus's parable: "God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector" (Luke 18:11). That man's heart was duplicitous; he was praising God with his lips, but essentially declaring his own worthiness: *God's sure lucky to have me on his team!* Who our kids are in secret before God, when they have internalized their identity in him, is who they are. And nothing more.⁴

Throughout Scripture, Jesus addresses people's soul holes. I see him dialoguing not because he needs answers, but because he longs to relate, to help us feel known, and to help us explore what's in us. He knew Zacchaeus needed to be seen (Luke 19:4-6), that blind Bartimaeus needed to articulate his longing to be healed (Mark 10:46-50), and that the man lowered through the roof by his friends needed his heart healed more than his legs (Luke 5:17-26).

A note on this: Finding worth and identity in God—not in oneself—requires a level of vulnerability and self-understanding that won't come easily to most kids. They're learning to cover shame like most adults already have. Time and a display of our own vulnerability form a "safe place," welcoming our kids out of hiding. Habits of authenticity require pursuing our kids through quality time, intentionality, and persistence.

Shedding shame to embrace personhood in Christ will be the struggle of our kids' lives, like it is with our own. Like me, you probably wish you could teach your kids everything you've learned in your decades, hopefully saving them the grief (and, sheesh, the embarrassment). But let's start with basic truth for them to build on: *This is who God says you are.*

Pride and Insecurity: What We Blow Up

My dad recently went in for knee reconstruction at a local surgical center. After the surgery began, the anesthesiologist realized he couldn't successfully intubate my father and secure his airway. But the surgeon had already flayed open my dad's knee. So, like in an *ER* rerun, someone forced oxygen into his lungs with a bag-valve mask by hand throughout the entire surgery.

My physician brother-in-law later explained that no one wants to deliver too little oxygen when bagging. Inevitably, the temptation is to bag too hard and too fast. And without a tube, the air isn't channeled exclusively into the lungs. That's what happened here—and what resulted in my dad's immense pain when he came to. His chest and abdomen were filled with air—far more painful than his knee.

The Greek word *phusioō*, translated in 1 Corinthians 4:6 as "pride" or "puffed up," literally refers to a distended or inflated organ—or a swelled sense of self. It's almost agonizing.⁵ I've found this idea helpful as I think about identity with my kids because I see insecurity and pride as closely related sins, like inflation or deflation. Insecurity is when we don't perceive ourselves as being worthy enough, which leads to our seeking that worth through a substitute god, an idol. That idol could be as simple as our own control or perfection (identity through something we *have*). For me as a teen, this looked like replaying every social situation in my

Permanent Truth

Identity is...

- about finding our worth as creatures made and greatly loved by God (Ephesians 2:4), bought by invaluable blood, created in a priceless image.
- about forsaking other false senses of self: what we've done, who people think we are, and what we have.
- foundational. Every other spiritual life skill rests on identity. For example, the Pharisees got a lot of life skills right, but they missed the "why."
- communicated through parental discipline by *exposing guilt* rather than communicating that kids must be *worthy of our acceptance*. Making our acceptance contingent on children's behavior only leads to shame. Like our relationship with God because of Christ, our displays of attachment, affection, and intimacy aren't based on what our kids do, how much they control themselves, or how well they meet our desires.

head to make sure I'd made no missteps, never wearing the color red (too much attention!), and forgoing that solo of the national anthem at the basketball game (because, in the words of *Back to the Future's* George McFly, "I just don't think I can take that kind of rejection").

Pride is insecurity's inflated cousin—a sense of self pumped up by achievements, what others think, or what we have (even if it's as simple as control or a false sense of security). It prevents us from recognizing our brokenness before God, keeping us self-sufficient, reticent to ask forgiveness, demanding, accusatory, and defensive. In my childhood, for example, I imagined my grades or behavior or awards or ability to please adults as increasing my worth. I was slow to repent because being wrong meant I was less than.

Pride and insecurity both stem from *unbelief* about who God says we are. And that unbelief separates us from God. When it comes to our kids' identities, we want them to be nourished with what he has declared true about them so they live from that place of wholeness rather than our clawing soul hunger. The book of Ephesians articulates our need to be "rooted and established in love...and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God" (Ephesians 3:17,19).

Making Your House a Shame-Free Zone

Ever told your daughter she needs to wash her hair tonight and had her go all Chernobyl on you? If we see a child overreact (upon honest assessment) when we discipline, the response could be identity related. Our instruction could be threatening the child's misguided sense of what attaches them to us: *I'm only worthy of affection and closeness because of what I do, how well I please someone, or how much control I have.*

Here, it's worth making a distinction between our children's feelings of guilt and their feelings of shame. Author Heather Davis Nelson explains:

Guilt's message is, "I did something bad," and needs justification and forgiveness. Shame's message is, "I am bad," and needs an identity shift

and relational connection. Sin leaves both in its wake, and shame is what lingers even after forgiveness has been sought and granted. Shame feels like it's welded onto you, but guilt feels like something outside of you.⁶

Parenting with shame disconnects relationally. It says, *You are unacceptable to me right now*. Parenting for guilt awareness, on the other hand, says, *I accept you. And I care about you enough to come alongside you for change*.

This might mean when you stumble on your child staring at raunchy stuff on the Internet, you set aside your own rage, hurt, terror, and yes, shame, and take time to pray and listen. While enforcing consequences, accountability, and a sense of gravity, you create an environment to promote ongoing healing and restoration together rather than covering up and leveraging kids' dread. Perhaps you use a firm (not disgusted) tone of voice or a gentle, soul-searching gaze rather than a searing one. Maybe you have a conversation on a walk away from siblings, rather than with your child in the hot seat.

One reason this is vital to parenting? From the minute they're born, kids subconsciously internalize an understanding of God based on their interactions with their parents. Like our relationship with God because of Christ, our displays of attachment, affection, and intimacy aren't based on what our kids do, how much they control themselves, or how well they meet our desires. *Yes*, we accept because God accepted us (Romans 15:7). But even our continued acceptance and unconditional care allows our kids to conceive God's own acceptance.

Soul Holes, Present Day

My daughter wasn't sleeping.

It was summer. No grades loomed over her. No schedule forced her to rise at 6:15.

To make a long story short, we discovered that her lack of sleep was linked to perfectionism, performance anxiety, and even the potential rejection of her peers. These worries were literally keeping her up at night. I try to express the gospel—the shame antidote of Jesus's ultimate love via the cross—to my daughter, my little

achiever, by stressing soul care. I want her to locate her inner Mary—the one who sits with Jesus and drinks him in (see Luke 10:38-42). Together we scrawled a list of the strategies my daughter could use to improve her sleep, purchased a workbook on teen anxiety, and keep talking about what’s planting these seeds of anxiety in her.

In teaching her to care for the body God gave her, I try to communicate that she isn’t his slave. She’s his daughter.

There’s a weird tension as we raise kids who love Jesus. How can we spur them on to love well and pour themselves out without connecting those acts to their sense of value, their ability to be perfect or perfectly pleasing?

We show them by not falling into these traps ourselves. As you identify your own soul holes, ask God, *How might I be passing down these idols to my kids?* I suspect the “sin[s] of the parents” (see Exodus 34:7) are passed down not only through a perfect storm of genetic tendencies but, even more, through our own inclinations.

Recently, my parents courageously talked with John and me (even inviting Baden) about their genogram—a diagram they’d constructed at a marriage retreat, outlining the history of the behavior patterns (like divorce, abuse, or alcoholism) of their family over several generations. My mom mentioned their rationale for disclosing it: “It’s hard to turn the tide on the sins of the fathers if you don’t know what they are.”

So weeks later, to my sleepless daughter, I said what we all need to say to ourselves when we discover a soul hole:

You don’t need to be afraid of not being perfect or disappointing people. Jesus loves you. So you can do all this great stuff to be kind and love people. But don’t do it so he’ll love you. That’s backward. You are loved when you perform and when you can’t—not because of either of those. God loves you because you are his, and I love you because you are mine.

Writing on the Wall: Practical Ideas

The following ideas are practical ways to teach your kids about their identity. Pick an activity or two to incorporate—remembering you’re not what you do, who others think you or your kids are, and so on—and give your kids a shove in the right direction.

Show your kids the star within.

Author Jamie Miller suggests gathering apples of different sizes, shapes (some misshapen, old, bruised), and colors. Show your kids that when you slice them horizontally, all their seeds are arranged as a star.⁷ In my language: All people are made in the image of God. He has inlaid his value and craftsmanship in us.

Teach your kids not to be an inflated balloon.

Grab a bicycle pump or balloon. Pump the handle or blow up the balloon, and talk to your kids about how when we don't choose to feel safe in God's love, we inflate or deflate ourselves based on what people think of us, having control, and our performance. But because we're made in God's image and because Jesus died for us, we know we're loved. We don't have to try to pump ourselves up anymore.

Race as a family.

Most kids have probably run in a race—and if you haven't had one recently, race as a family. If your kids are like mine, everything from drinking milk to racing to get shotgun in the car is a competition. So refer to a competition, and remind kids Jesus won the prize we could never win. We don't have to keep running to prove ourselves anymore.

Plant a large stick.

Outside, have a child attempt to plant a large stick into the ground. When it's as firm as they can get it, have them or another family member pull it out. Then have the entire family walk over to a mature tree and try to pull it out. Ask the kids, "Why won't the tree pull out of the ground?" Answer: The tree is rooted, established in the ground. Read Ephesians 3:16-19. God's love, the love we're rooted in, is stronger than any roots on earth! If we're rooted in God, we'll never be pulled out by any other force threatening who we are.

Share this benediction.

Authored by Pastor Bobby Schuller, this benediction is one which some families have framed for the wall: "I'm not what I do. I'm not what I have. I'm not what

people say about me. I am the beloved of God. It's who I am. No one can take it from me. I don't have to hurry. I don't have to worry. I can trust my friend Jesus and share his love with the world."⁸

Belay on.

Rock climbers will tell you that where you hitch your rope determines a lot of your safety and survival. They belay their rope to a secure point and use a question and answer to communicate readiness to climb: "Belay?" from the climber is answered by "Belay on" (that is, "Slack is gone—I'm ready") from the person responsible for the climber's safe descent. Hooking to something unstable could mean the difference between life and death. Consider giving kids their own carabiner to attach to a backpack as a reminder to hitch their identity to God alone—or ratchet things up a notch by taking them to a climbing gym for a full-on demonstration.

Quiet down.

Solitude, silence, and stillness profoundly affect our ability to detach ourselves from lies about our identity. When we're quiet, it's easier to discern that still, small voice. When we're alone and not working, it's harder to find our identity in what others think or what we do.

Go for a nature walk.

Get your kids outside! As the psalmist wonders, "When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is mankind that you are mindful of them, human beings that you care for them?" (Psalm 8:3-4). Parts of nature can act as "road signs," reminding us to thank God or to pray for others. Your kids could pack a camera (maybe disposable ones for each child?), journal, sketchbook, or watercolor supplies. God's universe often leads us to exclaim and catalog and create (see Psalm 19:1-4 and Romans 1:19-20).

Try this "deeply loved child of God" exercise.

With tweens or teens, try this exercise from Mission Training International, a

cross-cultural training and debriefing organization.⁹ Feel free to do it alongside your kids!

Give each child a piece of paper on which you've drawn a medium-sized square with the child's name in it. Using small sticky notes, ask everyone to write words that communicate how they'd describe themselves. Encourage them to be as honest as they can, even if other people might not like it. Stick these notes around the box with their name in it. (It's okay if your notes extend beyond the paper.) These words might relate to...

Roles. These might be words like *Mom. Sister. Student. Dentist. Driver for activities. Dishwasher. Funny guy. Voice of reason. Rebel.* Include who you are on your best days and your worst days.

Traits. These should be both how others see you (even if they're wrong) and how you see yourself. *Funny. Beautiful. Ugly.* Include things you were told growing up, even if you're not those things anymore. Perhaps include things you think you're not: *Not opinionated. Not funny. Not beautiful. Not skinny.* Feel free to balance these tougher ones with some levity, even if you crumple them up after laughing at them: *Maker of best chili in the world. Always right.*

Issues. A friend of mine placed *Single* on a sticky note—but also expressed, on other notes, the struggles and strengths this represents and how it causes others to view her: *Lonely. Mobile to serve others. Don't fit in. Rejected. More free time. Independent.*

If someone has an issue or trait they know affects them but they don't want to talk about it, that can be represented with a blank sticky note or one with an X.

Now write the words *deeply loved child of God* inside the box. Ask your kids about the meaning of each word (let each child answer at least once): *Deeply. Loved. Child. Of God.* Sometimes we might believe God loves us, but not deeply. Or we think God tolerates us! Or perhaps it's hard to imagine ourselves as loved like God's own child. Or we might see ourselves as deeply loved, but not by God.

Place one of your more vulnerable sticky notes—to encourage a sense of vulnerability—over the center message of your box. Show what happens when an identity “sticks” over our main identity as a deeply loved child of God. (Kids should see that our most important identity is covered up.)

Explain how sometimes God takes off a sticky note—an identity that has been important to us. We might not be the best basketball player anymore. We might lose our health or a job or a pet. Or we get married, and it's weird not to be as independent anymore. In these times, those subtracted sticky notes can show who we still are: deeply loved children of God.

Fresh Ink: Resources for Vibrant Faith

- Hone in on some of your own idols (and maybe your kids') with counselor David Powlison's X-Ray Questions. He asks stark questions to pose to yourself or older kids, like *What do you fear? Where do you bank your hopes?* Find these questions at janelbreitenstein.com/permanentmarkers/identity.
- Max Lucado's book *You Are Special* is priceless for communicating identity concepts to kids. (Makes me cry almost every time.) In the story, wooden people in a village award one another gold stars or gray dots to indicate their "specialness." But one outcast watches his first gray dot fall off after he begins to meet with Eli, the woodcarver.
- Listen to Lauren Daigle's "You Say" together as a reminder of who God says we are, in spite of fear, regret, and misleading emotion.
- I boil down "shame parenting" versus parenting for guilt exposure in a table and accompanying infographic available at janelbreitenstein.com/permanentmarkers/identity.

True Colors: Discussion Questions for Kids

- Talk about Nouwen's three lies with your kids. Which do they think they're most likely to be drawn in by? How have they seen that lately?
- Talk about your own "soul holes" and the ways you're tempted to find your worth in them. It's helpful for kids to see we're conscious of our own sin patterns. (Bonus: It provides accountability too.) You might

then suggest gently, “Sometimes I see that you might (carefully propose one of your child’s pet lies). What do you think?”

Think Ink: Contemplative Questions for Parents

What are your kids’ soul holes? Here are three tips to help you dig for the desire behind the desires:

- What’s the flip side? Sometimes it helps to think of your children’s strengths first and then consider the flip side. Could that fastidious daughter have some control issues? Could your overachiever find his worth in achievements (and wonder if anyone could value him apart from them)? Could a child everyone finds so lovable be finding her worth in what others think?
- Look for flare-ups. Flare-ups offer key clues to what motivates and shames our kids.
- What body language—suddenly leaning forward in anger, jabbing fingers, indignant tosses of the arms—gives me clues about what my kids value, legitimately or illegitimately? I might ask a child why tears filled their eyes during a particular statement. What were they thinking about when they said those words, or what felt especially painful?

Prayer of the Dependent Parent

Lord, your image in my kids is breathtaking.

You desire to be Master of our family's hearts, not just a God of good intentions or appearances. If my kids learn every skill in this book without knowing and loving you, it would all be for loss (Philippians 3:7).

Please give me discernment to understand the specific holes in each of my kids—holes so infinite only you can fill them. Help me understand the lies of our Enemy that each of my kids is most tempted to believe. As a family, give us opportunities to speak and believe the truth with which you answer those lies.

Let me seize occasions to mold my kids' identity around Jesus's finished work—not mine and not my kids'. We are so thankful for the freedom you bought for us from what others think, from what we do and have.

But only you can draw our hearts to find satisfaction in you. I ask you to draw myself and each of my kids, at our core, to find every day's rest in you.
