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Tracing Hands and Bedtime Rituals....

When my daughter Rachael was a little girl, we had a bedtime routine that was part traditional and part, well....crazy. After a long, eventful day of make believe and concentrated play, eating and nap-time, both Rachael and I were ready for the bedtime to begin.

First, I would ensure that her belly was full. I am not sure why, but that always satisfied me to know that she had had a day filled with nutritional and varied food. She was incredibly easy to feed. At the age of four, she ate almost everything I offered her and was already eating a local favorite—sauerkraut, which is fermented cabbage. Yum! She curiously tried everything I put on her plate whether it was plain, international or gourmet dishes, though inevitably she would rub her food all over her face and into her hair. When her belly was full, we would walk upstairs together and fill the bathtub with toys and bubbles and she would crawl in with pleasure. While she played in the water and bathed, I would find her little girl pajamas and one of her favorite books. Eventually the bubbles faded into the cooled water and Rachael would stand up clean and refreshed calling eagerly for the next step in our bedtime ritual. I would dry her beautiful, healthy body in a big, fluffy towel and sing songs while I tickled her feet—very much like my mother had done to me when I was a child. She would wrap herself in her towel like a regal queen to run across the hall and jump onto her bed. Wiggling into her pajamas with my help, Rachael carefully studied her story book. Usually she liked me to read from her children's picture Bible or Favorite Fairytales or Favorite Bible Stories. These were long stories filled with beautifully painted pictures on every other page. The edges of the book were gilded in shiny gold and I would read with as much animation and enthusiasm as I could gather at the end of our day. I was often tired from being Super Mommy, but I loved these moments at the end of the day when life was winding to a soft stop with my first born child snuggled in close to my side full of healthy food, soaked clean from a long day of innocence play and wonder, and urging me to read to her. As a writer, it was a delight to unveil a world of stories to her young mind. No matter how many stories I read to her, one was never enough and often a war of negotiation would begin even before I would read the first story. If I promised 2 stories, I would read two stories, though I admit I tried to turn more than one page at a time on nights when my voice would grow hoarse. She would usually say, "Mommy, you missed a page. Go back!" Sometimes I would even fall asleep on her bed reading the stories. Afterward, we would pray together or I would lay my hand on her head and pray a blessing over her. She would always lay quietly under my hand when I did this for her. I found this moment the gentlest end to our day. We must have been a beautiful sight because my husband Mike would often come around the corner of her door and stand watching us. But as soon as Rachael would spot her father, the tranquil atmosphere would disappear as she pushed aside the book and start yelling, "Daddy! Sing your song! Sing your song! PLEASE!?!?? Catch me, Daddy! Catch me!" "Oh, Rachael, I am tired. Maybe tomorrow night, okay, Honey?" he would sometimes say. She would jump up on the bed, all peacefulness and angelic auras gone in one moment. "Please, Daddy!!!" "Ok...just one time..." Well, "just one time" usually meant heroic, death-defying leaps from the bed with her Daddy standing farther and farther away—her wet hair, chubby little girl arms and radiant smile flying through the air to land safe in her Daddy's arms. She would laugh wildly and I would sigh. All the effort to end the day quietly out of reach...but I couldn't help laughing along with her and wishing I could still fly through the air and have someone big and strong to catch me. When I saw the fevered pitch start in her squirming body, I would say in a very stern voice, "Okay! That's enough, time for bed. She will never get to sleep if you keep winding her up like a top, Mike!" So we would tuck Rachael in her big, down comforter covered bed and turn off the light. "Wait! Please sing your song, Daddy!" Well, EVERYONE in this house—and in fact, the county—knew that Daddy—Mike—really did not sing very well, which of course made this the highlight of the night. Mike, usually very quiet and measured with his actions in public, would break out singing in his best Italian accent, "Oh, Solo Mio! Oh, Solo Mio!" and proceeds to dance like a, like a...well, I am not sure WHAT he was dancing like, but let's just say he was in his underwear and a t-shirt, but that's enough said. I could not help but laugh out loud. Rachael giggled and sighed contentedly as she snuggled deep in her down comforter and finally let her eyes droop. I checked the night light and carefully pulled the door closed all but the last 4 inches. "Ahh....yessssss," I thought to myself, "Now it's my turn to be clean, warm and comfy and read a book!" Joshua, our son, arrived about 4 years after Rachael and a similar sweet yet crazy bedtime routine followed for years afterward.

Sixteen years after I began my first bedtime routine with Rachael, I found myself in the Care Corner Orphanage in Thailand sitting with Nung's thin nine year old, lanky body on my lap one night during the chapel service. Her legs were wrapped tightly around the inside of my calves and if I had stood up, she would have remained attached to me. Our group, which consisted of 18 youth from the Grace Fellowship Youth Group, York, Pennsylvania (US), Matt Kramm, another youth whose missionary parents serve in the neighboring

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country of Cambodia and three leaders including me, had traveled almost exactly halfway across the world to a small village outside the Thai city of Chiangmai to minister to the children at Care Corner Orphanage. The love of Christ was the simple common thread among us and we quickly sensed that we had gained a second family. The first time I saw Nung she was standing against Rachael, her feet placed lightly on my daughter's feet, with her arms wrapped around her waist and her head nestled almost completely under her arm as if drawing from Rachael a little piece of tangible love....as if trying to match her breath for breath, heartbeat for heartbeat. Like a kitten innocently hungry for food, she quietly stepped into our hearts. I rejoiced for my daughter in that moment because I knew that her heart was being captured by this little girl. After working for years with World Vision, an international disaster relief and child sponsorship organization, I knew how lovely these moments were, how they can clarify our purpose to reach out and offer what we have to meet a need. I knew that Rachael could not inherit this knowledge—this love for missions—from me; she would learn it herself in God's timing on trips like this. But God was good to give me a little peek into her spiritual life, like a bird on a windowsill. After that moment, I found myself avidly watching Nung, drawn by her quiet gentleness, her kitten-like innocence. Eventually I found an opportunity to gather her onto my lap and demonstrate the love I felt growing inside my heart. Before I left the US, I had bought a simple spiral bound notebook to chronicle my thoughts through out the two week experience. Laying the notebook on what space remained on my leg that night during chapel; I reached for Nung's brown hand and placed it on a blank page. She turned around to peer into my face in silent question as she had often done during the first week of our acquaintance. There was something about the way she tucked herself into me. Every part of her body touched mine, except for her hands, and when she stopped her intent drawing occasionally, she leaned her head back into the crook of my neck. We would just sit. Something about the way she did this ignited the Mommy Instinct in me—the one that creeps back long after your babies are not babies anymore. The One that sways to some internal lullaby every time I hold a baby now. The One that causes my head to swing mid-sentence ready to rescue like a New York City Firefighter when a stranger's child's cry raises the hair on my arm in alarm.

I carefully traced her hand with my pen and raised it up to look at the small outline. She smiled in delight, took my pen and bent over the notebook drawing in deep concentration. Nung had a mission. I turned my attention back to the worship music and sang along in complete contentment while she did this. When she finished her drawing, she held it up in front of my face. "I Love You. Nung" she had written in English on the palm of her paper hand. I was surprised she knew how to write anything in English. Nung spoke very little and when she did it was in Thai in a soft voice which would cause me to bend very close to her mouth and point to my ear so she would repeat her words. I never knew what she said exactly, but we were beginning to understand each other anyway. I looked at the message and then returned it by having her trace my hand on a fresh page. My hand print looked gargantuan next to hers, which made her laugh when she was finished. I mimicked her and bent my head in concentration, writing "I Love You. Karen", tore out the page and handed it to her. She smiled again and folded it into a small square and shoved it into the pocket of her dress. We were communicating despite a huge language barrier and it was a satisfying end to a day in Thailand.

A few nights later, I found Nung on my lap again during the chapel service. At our group's morning lessons in the Thai language, I had learned to say, "I love you". I was saving it for just the right moment. At the close of the service, I whispered the words into her ear. She sat very still for a second and then turned around and looked at me in wonder. I could have taken her home in that moment. I ached with desire to do the things a Mother does every day but often takes for granted, the little things that are too soon gone. Just the night before, Rachael and I had walked her to the Rainbow House, where all the little children with HIV sleep at Care Corner Orphanage. We watched her walk across the common room to the cubbyhole that held her belongings and pull on her pajamas in semi-darkness. "Rachael, when you were her age, I did that for you..." Rachael stood watching and said nothing. So, when I whispered those words into Nung's ear, she seemed to gain confidence as she stood up. She put her hands together against her tilted face to indicate that she must go to bed, and took my hand. I let her lead me to the Rainbow House. A little two seater swing sat just outside the door. She sat down and patted the empty seat beside her. I sat down and we swung silently in the warm night air for exactly five swings. Then she stood up and led me to her cubbyhole. I reached for her pajamas as she started to tug them on herself then I pulled them over her head and smoothed her hair before following her to the bedroom she shared with two other girls. She lay down as I perched on the side of her bed. We just looked at each other for a minute. I didn't want the moment to end just yet. It didn't feel complete, so I put my hands together as if praying and said, "Nung, do you want me to pray for you?" She nodded furiously, immediately sat up and bent her head. I laid my hand on her silky straight black hair—so like my own—and prayed over her. Then she laid back down staring at me through the darkness. I saw a thought flash across her face and she reached behind her to unzip the front pocket of her book bag, which hung on a nail on the wall above her bed. Curious about what she was going to show me, I watched as she unfolded a piece of paper. There in her little hands, I saw my own large outlined hand staring back at me. Nung pulled the paper against her heart for a moment and then carefully refolded it on the crease lines and returned it to the little pocket. I was speechless.

We repeated the bedtime routine several more times and the last night of our trip, just after the prayer and just before she laid her head down, I pulled a gift from a bag I had mysteriously carried with me throughout the closing chapel service. I had wandered streets the night before and that afternoon looking for something special for Nung that would remind her of our little bedtime ritual. I placed a handmade doll, whose stuffed legs and arms swayed freely, in her arms against her heart. I have never seen such astonishment on a child's face. She held it out from her to look closely at the face, the pretty cotton dress and the soft shoes carefully sewn over the feet of the doll. Together, we examined it thoroughly, pulling up the dress to look at the under clothes and laughing in unison. Then she hugged it close. I took the arms and wrapped them tight around her neck and said, "Look. Karen hug Nung." She understood. Even though I would be halfway across the world by the next day, our bedtime hugs could continue.

When I was asked to come to Thailand two months earlier as a youth leader, the request was completely unexpected. I knew the surface reasons why I was needed on the trip. I had a close relationship with some of the youth and I loved them, my daughter was going along, and I had experience in missions and traveling. But the deep reasons eluded me. The year preceding this trip had been difficult on a personal and spiritual level. I had allowed myself to drift away from God—actually, I had deliberately moved away from Him, angry at some circumstances in my life over which I seemed to have little control. It was unlike me to do that so distinctly, but I had. In doing so, I found myself somewhat numb emotionally and disengaged spiritually many times when I wished I had not been. In the past months, I had felt the beginning of a spiritual reviving. I welcomed it. To hear His voice again was exciting and I yearned to move in closer to His presence. I had been riding on the edge of it like riding a huge wave headed for the shore. And I was ready to reach the shore. Something about the way Nung stood hugging Rachael had stirred my heart—something about the way she wrapped her little feet around the inside of my leg and tucked her face against my chest—something about her gently tapping into my Mommy Instinct at this moment in time had finished the thaw on my heart. The last night, as I said goodbye to Nung, I wasn't sad. I didn't cry like I thought I might. She was safe. She had many friends and her needs were being lovingly met at Care Corner Orphanage. She belonged to this place and I finally knew why I had come. Nung trusted me. That was enough for me to feel rescued. I rejoiced for both of us. We had come to each other like a gift, like gentle messengers and placed our hand prints on each other's life.

I guess I can still fly through the air and trust Someone big and strong to catch me.

By Karen Chronister