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# Fearfully and Wonderfully Made

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**Dear Sally and Nathan,**

*We are loving parents who desire the best for our three amazing children. When we began our parenting journey, we read every book and resource available at the time. These books spoke with authority on the best methods and formulas for parents. We took to heart what they had to say and felt prepared with a well-defined strategy planned out. But now, seven years into parenthood, we are suddenly feeling lost and overwhelmed. The singular advice and specific methods found in these books seem inadequate to address all the individual needs of our three very different children. What works for one, doesn't work for the other. We want to give our children what they need, but it seems there is no one method that works for all of them when it comes to our parenting. This has gotten us to a place where we feel lost, tired, and a bit hopeless in our ability to parent our children in a cohesive way. We love all of them and just need some insight in how to proceed and what direction we should walk with them.*

**—Louise**

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**From Sally:**

Thirty years ago, I was exhausted to my toes.

A respiratory virus had slowly moved viciously through our family, leaving us tired and ragged. Every night had left me caring for a different child and the sleeplessness had left me listless and drained. Somehow, three-year-old Nathan had avoided the dreaded plague, and for a moment, I believed against hope that all might be well, until, suddenly, he started to cough.

As the illness descended upon Nathan, my husband, Clay, offered to take the other kids out to church. Fatigued, I nonetheless stayed home with Nathan to keep him company and see him through the illness on my own. I felt insufficient to the task, introverted, and just wanting to retreat into my own quiet solitude for a moment of respite.

As I sat down on the couch, Nathan came bounding in with a smile and sat next to me. Pressing down the exhaustion, I turned to him and asked him what he wanted to do.

“Let’s talk!” he proclaimed, confidently.

And for the next forty-five minutes, that is precisely what we did. I entered into every little dimension of his universe: from his observations and interests to his perspectives on other children, to his cherished delights and genuine concerns. I listened attentively, giving him dedicated eye contact and rubbing his back gently while he chattered on. Soon, the busy line of conversation trickled as he began to grow tired. As his energy slipped away, he looked at me with earnest and said, “I feel so close to you, Mama. I wish we could spend more time talking together. I just have lots of things to say! Thank you for listening to me.”

With those words, my mama heart melted, and I saw, perhaps for the first time, the real Nathan underneath the incessant wiggles and

disruption. I saw, as if in an epiphany, the truth about Nathan. He is a verbal processor. For Nathan, what he still desires more than anything is to be heard, to be allowed to speak his thoughts in relationship with those whom he most loves. I realized in that moment that I was his confidant, and that in opening up to me, he was allowing me to access a genuine and sincere part of his personality.

I thought of how some of his teachers told me with exasperation that he constantly needed to be hushed; and I realized just how counterproductive and wrong that attitude was. They presumed he was rebellious and attempted to subdue something that was never meant to be suppressed in him. It was to Nathan's glory, and essentially to God's, for him to be able to communicate and open up about the world of words and ideas constantly bouncing around in his head—especially at three years old! I saw, in an instant, that this is who Nathan was, and if I was to truly love him, I needed to make space to hear his words and to affirm them. There would always be time for training, which we did on a continual basis, and helping him to learn to listen to others, but I needed to see that his bursting heart was good.

This is a crucial part of our responsibility as parents: to accept the reality that each child is made uniquely with their own capacities, personalities, interests, strengths, and weaknesses. Our children are their own special stories, books waiting to be opened up and read with interest. You and I as parents are the readers, the ones who might take the time to dive deep into the whole story of their creative individuality. The book of every child is its own genre, and each child has different “characters” that make up their inner world. In truth, we all are our own stories waiting for others to read us. Just as it delights you and me when someone takes the time to understand our inner workings, so too will your children come to life when you delve into their special narratives.

To achieve this insight requires a special investment of time and energy on our part, a willingness to develop habits of observation, and the patience to allow those aspects of our children to emerge so that we can engage with them in a meaningful way. It is understandable that we often feel tired and simply want to get on with our lives; and yet if we don't take the time to understand, to study and learn each child's "bent," we are inviting more conflict and misunderstanding in the future. The effort we develop in gaining a vision for the uniqueness of our children will in time pay dividends, drawing them closer to us, and allowing us to be set up for success in how we help them be the best version of themselves.

I won't lie to you: learning the inner workings of your child has been a lifetime project and has stretched me more than I could ever have imagined. And yet the process has given me a depth of insight and compassion, not only for my children but also for other people in my life as well.

To do this work in an effective manner, you will need to develop your own techniques for drawing out these aspects. For instance, two of my children are extroverts, and two of them are introverts. I had to take a different approach with my introverts because they weren't as vocal about their desires; and yet they were just as eager to open up to me and share their thoughts and feelings. I learned that, for them, it was necessary to sequester them in their own individual time and space so that they feel comfortable opening up. Not only is it acceptable to manage each child's needs according to their particular makeup; it was necessary for a whole and healthy relationship with each child.

There is no formula for discovering the dimensions of each of your precious ones; it is a long-term process of trial and error. But the more you listen and observe, letting them communicate themselves to you in their own way, the more you will become an

expert in understanding each of your children. You will become a trusted interpreter of them, helping them understand themselves, their family members, and the world around them in a way that strengthens them and helps them thrive.

Every child is designed uniquely by God, and He has entrusted you with His special creations. Over time, we can move away from seeking to mold our children into our own image so they're easier to manage, and instead, learn to see them as unique, creative expressions of God's design. They are fearfully and wonderfully made by Him (Psalm 139:14)! Through patience and commitment, we will eventually reap a harvest. Today, I encourage you to begin the journey of discovering the individual wonders of each one.

### **From Nathan:**

I remember lying stomach-down on the floor as a six-year-old poring over the beautiful pages of the book in front of me. My mother sat next to me pointing out details of the wonderfully drawn artwork that covered its shiny paper. The book was called *Noah's Ark* and was a giant collection of pages filled with a master artist's rendering of nature, animals, and creation in all its glory.

I gazed wide-eyed at the wonders of God's beautiful creation reflected in the paintings of lions, tigers, bears, deer, eagles, lizards, and more. But my mom had shown me this book, not for a random moment of novelty, but instead intentionally with a message to share and a lesson to impart. She knew that recently I had been struggling, even at six years old, with getting in trouble, keeping up with schoolwork, and feeling like I was "too much." So, she pulled out the giant book, almost as big as my little body, set it on the floor, and bid me to come and look at it with her.

As we explored the enchanting pictures, she made a point to

underline the obvious, showing the vast diversity of creativity God had expressed when making the natural world, before turning to me and saying, “Nathan, do you see how different and unique God has made all the plants and animals in nature? How each one is so different, but so beautiful as they serve a unique purpose for which they were created?”

“Yeth,” I replied, with my six-year-old lisp, looking up at her with innocent and trusting eyes.

“Well, in the same way, God created you unique. And every single way that you might feel different is actually an intentional design by God for the story He has for you to tell.”

Every painting was stunning—different colored animals with different designs. Some flew, some swam, some crawled; all unique and made for their own story in God’s creation. While I perhaps couldn’t grasp the gravity of the message she was sharing that day, the truth was planted somewhere deep in my soul. Many times throughout the years, as I struggled with mental illness, learning disabilities, and an outside-the-box personality, my mom would, in some way, utter those words again: “You were intentionally created unique, and that’s a wonderful and beautiful thing.” That seed she planted would be watered by her loving words, so that now, almost three decades later, that truth has taken root so deeply in my heart and psyche that it guides, strengthens, and empowers me.

Sometimes, when I’m back in the family home, I hunt through our vast library to find that old book—its pages well-worn and the fingerprints evidence of my childhood fascination—to remind myself of the beautiful truth my mother shared with me all those years ago. Even now, I can be tempted to believe that the things that are different about me are deficiencies and the unique aspects of my personhood are curses. But as I pore over those still-beautiful pages, I am reminded of the God to whom my mother introduced

me—the God who is a grand and wonderful artist; who made endless colors, countless species, and a never-ending world of diverse beauty. That same God made me unique in my own right; and that’s a wonderful and beautiful thing.

In Scripture, the psalmist writes:

*For you created my inmost being;  
you knit me together in my mother’s womb.  
I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made;  
your works are wonderful,  
I know that full well. (Psalm 139:13–14)*

This gives us an insight into God’s original design for the world, and for us, one where each of us was created intentionally and carefully with unique skills, longings, abilities, minds, and hearts. But unfortunately, today’s culture has drifted further and further away from God’s original plan for who we are and who we were created to be. Now we live in a world that demands conformity, one that tries to take all the unique and beautiful things about us and shove them into a mold that will better fit standardized testing, predictable behavior, and “normal lives.”

In the 2018 study “Feeling Special, Feeling Happy,”<sup>1</sup> researchers found that satisfaction with one’s uniqueness resulted in more authentic living, and more authentic living correlated to much higher rates of happiness. This study points to the fact that every child has been wired to accept and embrace the things that make them unique, and the science points to the reality that if parents help foster that in the hearts of their children, their children will experience more happiness with both their individual lives and individual selves. This, in turn, will ultimately enable them to live freely and healthily into the story that God has for them.

But the unfortunate thing is that this world seems bent on working against this God-created calling to individuality; the world continues to do this even though it doesn't actually work to bring children future success. Multiple studies have shown over and over again that standardized testing, aside from its questionable ethics of fairness, is a poor metric at predicting a child's future success, and only measures a child's ability to take tests well and memorize meaningless facts they almost immediately forget.<sup>2</sup> It does nothing to measure long-term success in life. But we keep doing it. Why?

Through peer pressure, strict grading systems, standardized testing, and social coercion, modern culture has a vested interest in shaving down and eliminating the things that make us and our kids unique. These things force us into quantifiable lumps that think, speak, and act alike as groups of carbon-copy people who are easier to control, guide, and sum up, rather than collections of uniquely thinking, acting individuals. What culture offers in exchange for the dissolution of our own uniqueness is comfort and perceived safety; it's easier to go with the flow and quiet the things about us that don't fit in. To pursue the career you feel you're supposed to, to find the kind of spouse you're expected to, to live the life you're pressured into. But it's not more beautiful, and it's not how we were created to live.

Psychologist Carl Jung said, "The self as the essence of individuality is the unitemporal and unique; as an archetypal symbol it is a God-image and therefore universal and eternal."<sup>3</sup> In other words, our being made in the image of a unique, outside-the-box, and diversely creative God who doesn't fit the bounds that man has so often tried to put Him in, means we too are made, not as a "grouping," but instead as entirely unparalleled creations with purposes and stories unique to only ourselves. To believe this

about ourselves and to impart this to our children will bring a freedom that God designed us to live inside of.

The desire of culture to force us into bland conformity and to rid us of our individually created minds and hearts is nothing new. Some of the greatest thinkers, artists, and inventors throughout history faced intense pushback while living into their unique callings and personhood. Thank goodness they did, as the world is a better place for it.

Of course, every unique attribute we or our kids possess comes with its own unique difficulties. But these difficulties are evidence that every child needs specialized and tailored love and guidance to bring about more intentionally guided freedom, not pressure and conformity that often brings about oppression.

Early on in my life it was clear that I had major mental illness (OCD) and learning disabilities (ADHD, dyslexia). While those were important for my parents to pay attention to, address, and help me with, they instead focused their energy on my strengths, giftings, and passions, not on the areas I struggled with. My mom and dad took note that from a young age, I had a natural ability for creativity, performance, and storytelling—spending hours writing my own scripts and novels, dressing up and playing pretend, and dreaming up detailed imaginary worlds. So instead of forcing me to excel at things I was never made for (like math, spelling, and grammar), they leaned into who God had created me to be as evidenced by my own natural passions and abilities. Of course they helped me in the places I needed assistance, but they celebrated the areas I naturally excelled at, never making me feel “less than” for being the person God had created me to be.

Even when teachers, friends, and “professionals” told my parents I needed to be more disciplined (which veered away from my creative pursuits) or put pressure on me to fit in, I have been able to

live a life of freely and wisely following the path God had for me because of the decision my mom and dad made in faith. As an adult, I have spent the last decade working as an actor, author, and filmmaker and every day pursuing my calling; and I can use my gifting and passions, which might never have been possible if my parents had tried to subdue rather than celebrate my unique makeup.

My parents, knowing God, wrapped their entire philosophy of parenting around the truth found in Psalm 139 that their children were “fearfully and wonderfully made,” so that even with all my uniquenesses—even the ones that were hard and required patience and grace—they were to be celebrated and cultivated.

But I wasn’t the only unique child in our family. I was the third of four children who, like me, were also created with their own unique and beautiful designs, each requiring and receiving the same celebration and cultivation I enjoyed. We were not compared to each other or expected to be like each other. We were encouraged to live into the unique and glorious designs in which we had been created.

The oldest, Sarah, is quiet, graceful, and poetic. Creating worlds of beauty in her mind, she shares and expresses these thoughts with thousands of readers through books filled with prose and deeply felt observations about story, life, and faith. Now she has branched out with her own stories of her beautiful children in her lifegiving and loving home.

Joel, the oldest boy, is our absent-minded professor, who lives in the mental world of an artist. As a composer and fiction writer, his thoughtful reflections on the deep and beautiful parts of life are expressed through his complex and gorgeous musical compositions and imaginative stories.

I am the youngest boy—an outside-the-box lover of thought, story, truth, and ideas that I bring to life with laughter, teasing,

and jokes, expressed in my writing and performance. My desire to tell stories grew into a life of acting in a variety of places, and in writing, making movies, books, and podcasts.

Joy, the youngest, is a tenacious and driven soul, dedicated to both learning and teaching those around her the wonders of truth and beauty, all with a wink and pithy remark on her podcasts, in her books, and in classrooms, having fought through the ranks of higher education.

Each of us is so different, but each of us was created uniquely and wonderfully for and by God. God has created each of us—you, me, your kids, everyone—with the care of a master artist, with the intention of a passionate storyteller, with the expertise of a skilled programmer, and with the care of a loving parent. So often we forget the majesty with which we were created; but having been created in the very image of God Himself, we must remember just how uniquely beautiful He has made us. God, as the greatest artist, has created each of us with a diverse array of giftings, needs, longings, and abilities. Like the myriad of colors, textures, smells, animals, trees, rocks, plants, and terrains we find in nature, so too has God designed us with even more majesty, beauty, and diversity.

## Scripture Reading

*For you created my inmost being;  
you knit me together in my mother's womb.  
I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made;  
your works are wonderful,  
I know that full well.  
My frame was not hidden from you  
when I was made in the secret place,*

UNIQUELY YOU

*when I was woven together in the depths of the earth.  
Your eyes saw my unformed body;  
all the days ordained for me were written in your book  
before one of them came to be.  
How precious to me are your thoughts, God!  
How vast is the sum of them!  
Were I to count them,  
they would outnumber the grains of sand—  
when I awake, I am still with you. (Psalm 139:13–18)*

## FAMILY DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What ways do you see that you are unique from other people?
2. Do you like the feeling of being unique? How does it feel?
3. What are the hardest and best parts of your uniqueness?
4. How do you see that you could use your uniqueness for God and for good?
5. Is it ever hard to deal with others' unique traits? Why?

PERSONALITY IS THE SUPREME  
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IT IS AN ACT OF HIGH COURAGE  
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ABSOLUTE AFFIRMATION OF ALL  
THAT CONSTITUTES THE INDIVIDUAL,  
THE MOST SUCCESSFUL ADAPTATION  
TO THE UNIVERSAL CONDITIONS  
OF EXISTENCE COUPLED WITH THE  
GREATEST POSSIBLE FREEDOM FOR  
SELF-DETERMINATION.

CARL JUNG