

PLAIN TRUTH®

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inside

CHRISTIANITY WITHOUT THE RELIGION®

Stretch Marks of a Mother's Love

By Greg Albrecht

The stages of motherhood, as seen from the eyes of her child:

Age 4: *My mommy can do anything.*

Age 8: *My mommy knows a lot.*

Age 14: *My mom doesn't know as much as she thinks she does.*

Age 18: *My mother is hopelessly old fashioned—she's way out-of-date.*

Age 30: *Before I make a big decision, I'm going to call my mom.*

Age 55: *She's gone now. I wonder what my mother would have done when she had this decision to make.*

Age 70: *She's been gone for a long time now. How I wish I could talk with my mom again and tell her how much I loved and appreciated her.*

Englishman John Wesley, one of the great patriarchs of the Protestant branch of Christianity, whose contributions and faith gave rise to what is known as Methodism today said this about his own mother: "I learned more about what Christianity is all about from my mother than all the theologians in England."

Mothers carry **stretch marks**, which, for the rest of their lives, are etched on their bodies as a memory of their stretching to accommodate and welcome a new life into the world!

How much do we owe our mothers? How much are **the stretch marks of a mother's love** worth? We can never repay our mothers, can we?

And that's truly a Christ-centered insight into the love of a mother—

it's a love that is given without consideration of repayment—it's a grace that outdoes itself, day after day and week after week and year after year.

Another way of appreciating and more fully comprehending a mother's love is to think of it from the flip side—what we can learn from children as they are loved by their mothers.

Here's a passage from a book titled *The Course of Love*, by Alain de Botton:

Children teach us that love is, in its purest form, a kind of service. The word has grown freighted with negative connotations. An individualistic, self-gratifying culture cannot easily equate contentment with being at someone's call.

We are used to loving others in return for what they can do for us... Yet babies can do precisely nothing. There is, as slightly older children sometimes conclude... no "point" to them. That is their point.

They teach us to give without expecting anything in return, simply because they need help badly—for we are in a position to provide it. We are inducted into a love based not on an admiration for strength but on a compassion for weakness, a vulnerability common to every member of the species and one which has been and will eventually again be our own... these helpless creatures are here to remind us that no one is, in the end, "self-made": we are all heavily in someone's debt.

And finally the author concludes about the kind of love given so

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One Day in May

We walked slowly into the funeral home together amidst a shower of cold rain and gray ash. Following him in, I can still see the collection of raindrops and ash making a paste on the shoulders of my father's black pinstripe suit. My best friend, Tim, had died after being struck by a car a few days earlier. He died while delivering newspapers from the back of a bicycle on his early morning paper route. We were there, on that bleak day in May, to express our sorrows, to pay our last respects, and to say goodbye to Tim.

A few days earlier, I had learned the pure joy of experiencing the natural intersection of blind chance, sport and self-discovery. As a late and last entrant to participate in the Mile Run at a local youth group track meet, my life was about to take off. After we'd all lined up along a curved white line and the gun had been fired, I finished well for a twelve-year-old running against much older and more experienced competitors. Although I didn't win the race on that one day in May, I'd found something I would come to make my own.

The day was May 18th, 1980. That day was the day my best friend died. That day was the day I found passion, purpose and new identity as I stepped onto an all-weather track. May 18, 1980 was also the day that Mt. St. Helens erupted into a billion little pieces in southwest Washington state. On that one day in May, all three events took place at exactly the same time.

You may ask, why would the

eruption of Mt. St. Helens in southwest Washington state matter to you from all the way across the country in western Pennsylvania? As my father and I walked into that funeral home to say goodbye to Tim, ash from the eruption of Mt. St. Helens rained down on us.

The jet-stream had carried ash all the way across the country to western Pennsylvania in just a few days. As the ash fell, mixing itself into a cold May rain, I was left with nothing but a series of troubling questions:

Why had this happened to Tim? Why did Tim's life have to end? Why did his life end on that one day in May, just as my life was really beginning to take off? Was there any fairness to any of it at all?

As a boy of only twelve years-of-age at the time, I had to learn that there are just some questions for which we have no answers. As the truth of it all hit home, I felt as if my life had erupted into a billion little pieces.

For reasons beyond me, I've had forty-three years since that one day in May to wrestle with those questions. I've had forty-three years of life that my best friend, Tim, has not. As is often the case, those questions have led to more questions: Was what happened all those years ago just a part of the plan of God? What was God's will? Was there purpose behind Tim's life ending, while my life, in a sense, had just begun?

As a Christ-follower, I always try to allow room that our Lord may well be at work in the events of our lives. Certainly, our Savior can and does redeem everything that

happens to us in our lives for good. I believe nothing in Christ Jesus is ever wasted or lost. Yet, I still wrestle with the questions.

The wisdom of the book of Ecclesiastes tells us that *there is a time for every purpose* (experience) *under heaven* (Ecclesiastes 3:1-8). We all know these poetic and practical verses so well. As I read them, I see that life seems to be a mixture of both the good and the bad; a juxtaposition, if you will, between that which gives to us and that which takes from us. As to a reason for why life is this way, the author gives us no definitive answer. Life is as life is, as I read it. And that, we must come to terms with.

As such, I think about that one day in May every May 18th. To be honest, I think about that day much more frequently than that. In my mid-50s now, I'm deeply grateful for the passion, purpose and limited identity that came to me through running, although those days are long behind me now. And, I wish that Tim would've had the same opportunities in a longer life that I've enjoyed. What I'm most grateful for is my life in Christ Jesus, and that one day, I believe I will see Tim once again, and will have the chance to ask our Lord and Savior the questions for which I've had no answers. Tim and I will be able to ask those questions together. Until then, as Christ-followers, we wait and hope and try to make sense of the days we've been given. We rest in him, knowing that one day, all will make sense. □

—Ed Dunn

Continued from page 1

lavishly by mothers to their children and what it teaches:

We learn the relief and privilege of being granted something more important to live for than ourselves.

From a mother's perspective, **the decision to have a child is, as someone once said, like deciding forever to have your heart go walking around, exposed to the world, outside your body.**

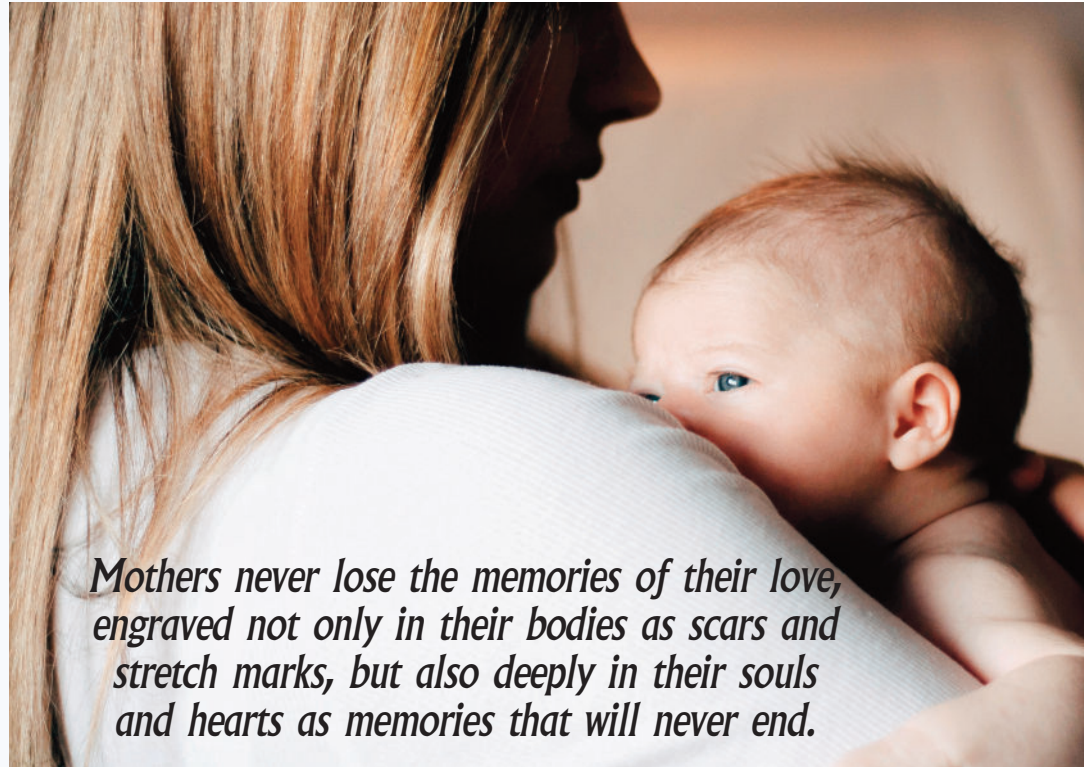
And of course, those **visible stretch marks** are the scars of sacrifice and the labor—the ordeal a mother's body endured as it made room not just for one life, but one more—and prepared that new body for a life of its own.

"This Too Shall Pass Away"

"This too shall pass away" was one of the sayings my mother loved. For my mother, when times were tough, and we had many of them, "this too shall pass away" was a reminder that no matter how hard and difficult and seemingly endless a particular task or project might be, one day it will be over and done with. And then in hindsight there will be relief, appreciation, and joy over a life well lived.

"This too shall pass away" was also meaningful for her in a more positive way, as she reminded herself to live in the moment, to cherish experiences and not to be in too much of a hurry to move on to the next chapter in her book of life. As a mother of adult children she looked back and realized a little three-year-old will only be three for 365 days, and then that three-year-old is gone, and a four-year-old takes his or her place.

My wife and I often recall those dirty diapers, or the British term "nappies," which both of our children wore as youngsters in the United Kingdom. Their odor permeated our flat or house, alerting anyone who walked through our front door that a baby was in residence. For us, that time has passed—**this too shall pass away.**



Mothers never lose the memories of their love, engraved not only in their bodies as scars and stretch marks, but also deeply in their souls and hearts as memories that will never end.

Those days when you couldn't wait for your child to start walking and talking—**they passed**, didn't they? The days when your baby was only able to crawl gave way to the days when your little child not only walked, but you had to watch them like a hawk as they started to fearlessly venture anywhere and everywhere.

Not long after children begin to talk, they enter the age of wonder—a fascinating place where they are continuously amazed, as each new day brings endless questions, many of them unanswerable—like:

Why is the sky blue?

Why is air invisible?

Why do trees have so many leaves?

Why do lions roar?

But those days quickly go by—**this too shall pass away**—and those days when you could not shut your child up pass and a decade or less later, when they are teenagers, you can hardly get them to say a word.

The days when a child is so completely dependent upon its mother and father—a time of such incredible work and sacrifice on the part of the mother (and the father)—**those days pass** and soon that same child desperately wants to do everything for themselves. They often even seem embarrassed to have you, their parent, around.

When they go to school, slowly but surely, the authority for life and the person relied on for wisdom and information moves away from you and toward teachers in school—and then the focus of right and wrong moves to rock stars and movie stars and to your children's friends and to social media. It's a humbling experience. You were once so important and now... not so much, it seems.

But we take comfort knowing that the temporary love affair with anyone and everyone other than parents—especially their mothers as the authority figure—**this too shall pass away.** It all will pass—so do not feel that you must endure the difficult times forever, and do not neglect to fully immerse yourself in the joy of the delightful and wonderful times.

You may have heard the story about the mother who was so upset because neither her adult son or daughter were coming home for Thanksgiving. She called her daughter and said:

"Honey, you don't have to worry about coming home for Thanksgiving. This old house won't be a very happy one by then anyway—in fact, your father may have moved out by then. You see, your father and I are getting a divorce."

The daughter was in shock: "Forty-

This too shall pass away. The days when a child is so completely dependent upon its mother and father... those days pass and soon that same child desperately wants to do everything for themselves.



five years of marriage and now you're getting a divorce? No Thanksgiving? I don't think so—I'm calling my brother right now—we're both going to be there for Thanksgiving with our families. Forget about the divorce." She hung up.

As she hung up the phone on her end, the mother looked at her husband and smiled: "Looks like we will have a great Thanksgiving after all—and to top it all off, I bet they will both pay for their airline tickets."

This too shall pass—but the stretch marks of a mother's love are forever reminders:

- Many of you are mothers, and each one of you has a story about each and every one of your children. You remember them—you pause over old photographs in the albums and relive them growing up.
- As a mother you don't begrudge **the stretch marks of your love**—your sacrifices and selfless service on behalf of your children was what mothers do—and you gladly gave them your heart, your soul, your resources and your love.

You gave your children time, talents and treasures. You gave them your all.

Stretch Marks of a Mother's Love

Mothers gain and lose pounds—mothers have scars and stretch marks, each one telling a story. Mothers lose elasticity of their skin

as they age—mothers (and fathers) lose hair, teeth and muscle tone.

But mothers never lose the memories of their love, engraved not only in their bodies as scars and stretch marks, but also deeply in their souls and hearts as memories that will never end. Two thoughts that may seem obvious, but they need to be said:

1) **As children, we must never forget to constantly thank our mothers**—for the things we know she did, and the MANY things we don't.

2) **And to you mothers out there**—wherever you are. Thank you—thank you for the scars you bear, the stretch marks that are the trophies of your love.

- Thank you for the commitment of your time—of your endless work washing clothes, folding them, making meals, packing lunches for school, sitting down and helping with homework, holding hands and wrapping your arms around the tears and hurts that were a part of your child's journey into maturity.

- Thank you for helping us see a glimpse of the love of our heavenly Father, for not keeping track of all your efforts expecting that one day your child would pay you back.

- Thank you for your unconditional love—a mother's love—thank you for all that is grand, inspirational and majestic about a mother's love.

- Thank you for your love—thank you for **the stretch marks of a mother's love.** □

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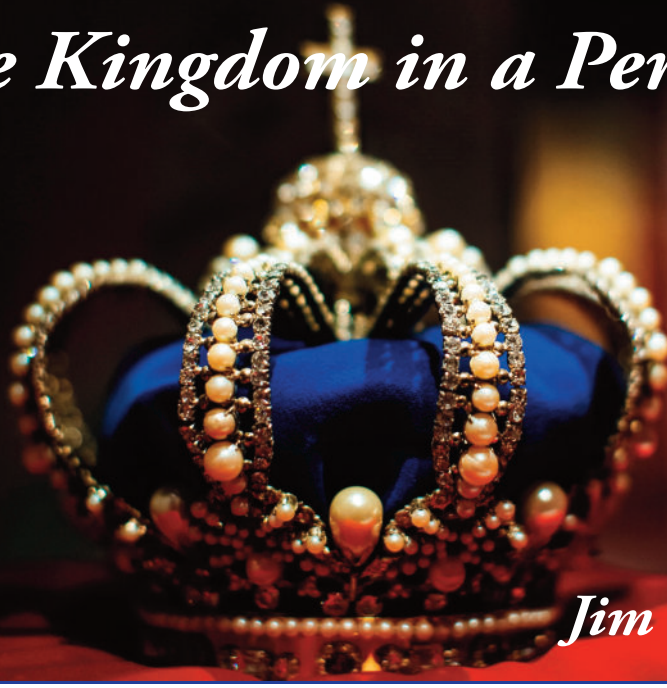
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**Reflections Along the Jesus Way
with Greg Albrecht**

Christianity Without the Religion—Quote for the Day

The Kingdom in a Person



Jim Fowler

The new covenant gospel is all about the advent (coming or arrival) of the “kingdom of God.” Jesus declared “the kingdom of God has come” (Luke 11:20) and “the kingdom of God is in your midst” (Luke 17:21), because he was conveying that the kingdom of God was in himself.

The Greek word for “kingdom” is *basilea*. The Greek word for “king” is *basileus*. The Greek word for “reign” is *basileuo*. The early Christian writers, Origen and Tertullian, introduced a variant of these words when they used the term *autobasileia*, meaning “the kingdom in himself.”

The kingdom of God is intrinsic to, and inherent in, the person of Jesus Christ, the divine King.

This distinction was brought to the fore when Pope Benedict XVI wrote a series of books on Jesus of Nazareth, and stated, “Jesus himself is the Kingdom; the Kingdom is not a thing, it is not a geographical dominion like a worldly kingdom. It is a Person. It is HE.”

The kingdom of God is not a static territory, authority sphere, or future theocratic system. The kingdom is the

ontological presence and dynamic function of the Lord and King JESUS as he reigns in the lives of his people, both individually and collectively.

As Dietrich Bonhoeffer expressed it, “Jesus is the Being and the Act of everything that God does” and is doing.

Jesus did not come to introduce, proclaim or bring anything other than himself. The living Lord Jesus is the reality of God’s grace, the gospel salvation, eternal life, righteousness, holiness—the kingdom and all that is Christian. The kingdom is inherent in the Person of JESUS, and is personally operative as he reigns in the interior spirit of receptive Christ-followers, who will necessarily be involved in the collective interaction of the Body of Christ, the Church.

The Kingdom of God

The gospel records, especially the synoptic gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke, place much emphasis on the “kingdom.” Matthew refers to the “kingdom of heaven” rather than the “kingdom of God” in deference to the Jewish reluctance to speak the divine name.

The Jewish people of first-century Judea were chafing under oppression of the Romans, and they had an intense anticipation for a promised Messiah who would restore the kingdom of David that they conceived in nationalistic, political, geographical and racial parameters.

Jesus countered the Jewish expectations when he declared, “My kingdom is not of this world” (John 18:36). He came to restore the kingdom of David, but not in the terms that the Jewish people expected. He came as King to bring the reign of the kingdom in Himself (*autobasileia*). Everything Jesus came to bring to mankind was in himself—salvation, wisdom, life, truth, kingdom.

He came to bring himself to a fallen humanity, the vital dynamic of God to dwell within receptive human beings and to reign spiritually in the kingdom of their hearts. **The kingdom of God has come in the Person of JESUS Christ**, and his desire is to dynamically reign as King in our lives and in his Church. □

Excerpted from Jim Fowler’s book, *The Issue Is Jesus*.

Grieving Nels



Stuart Segall

Some of my earliest memories as a child are of being fearful of death. All my mother could do was giggle a little to have a young four-year-old who was so afraid. She tried to comfort me, as best she knew how, as a young Jewish mother who had no real spiritual life or belief.

When I was about six years old, my parents were having our small home in Miami professionally painted. An old gentleman with silver hair and circle wire rim glasses pulled up to the house. He was the painter and his name was Nels. Nels took out his tools and painter's cloth and prepped the home.

He asked me to be his assistant and I was thrilled. After a few days of helping him in a small child's way, I was enamored with this gentle old man with his soft voice and smile. I had decided at age six, that I too would be a great house painter someday!

On day three or four Nels said "Goodbye, see you tomorrow," and slowly drove away in his old 1943 Dodge Wayfarer (like the one above). I ran to the edge of the road and waved goodbye until he was out of sight, and of course, he would extend his hand out the window until we could no longer see each other.

This time, though, a few houses down the road, his car pulled off to the side of the road and slowly came to a stop. I was intrigued, and even though I was not supposed to, I ran down the road to see why he pulled over. When I reached the driver's side of his car, there he was slumped over the big steering wheel with his face looking right at me.

His eyes were open, big blue ones under those wire-rimmed glasses. He still had a gentle smile but I could see his color changing before my eyes. I asked him what was wrong. He said nothing, but it seemed he tried to convey something in his movement. Then his eyes slowly closed. I ran home crying, not knowing what to do. A policeman later told me that Nels was gone. I could not comprehend that. I had lost a parakeet that I had loved dearly, but that was my only acquaintance with death. I had just lost the man that I adored. I deeply loved this man who reminded me of Geppetto.

For a fearful young boy, this was a tough introduction to the subject of what I feared the most, death. After that, I worried about how long anything or anyone I would love would live.

What does a boy do with his grief? Who will comfort him? What adult would understand a crushed six-year-old kid? What would you offer him? How do you help him understand grief? I would grow up from this and learn that grief is "love with no place to go."

Time would heal most of me. I say "most" because 62 years later, tears still roll down my eyes when I write this. Later on in this life, as a young man, I would realize that grief helped prepare me for life with empathy. For forty-one years I have performed the service of grief counseling. It, in part, equipped me for comforting and consoling others in their time of suffering.

I would not sign up for grief. If the list came my way, I would pass on it, rather than see it as an opportunity. However, grief happens to us all, and while I did not want it, I don't want to squander the opportunity when it happens.

"Grief is a nasty game of feeling the weakest you have ever felt and morphing it into the strongest person you will have to become."—Windgate Lane

We live in a grieving world, don't we? Locally, nationally and throughout the world, this kind of suffering abounds. I am grateful for the hope and the truth of knowing our future because of and in Jesus Christ.

"He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and there will be no more death, mourning or crying or pain, for the former things have passed away" (Revelation 21:4).

I would learn these words as a teen time after time and the blessing of having this hope that lies within.

As a boy, I was shipwrecked emotionally when I so unexpectedly lost my dear friend Nels. Today I help comfort and encourage people to look at that time we will see ahead when "God shall wipe away all tears." No more expected or unexpected "goodbyes."

Never underestimate the pain of the quiet people around you and never underestimate the power of listening or just sitting there in the darkness with someone, and later on, a few caring words.

It is important to try to be even more mindful of what is going on around us. I remind myself to use my empathy from the past. Each day I carry a first-aid heart kit when it is needed, and I encourage you, too, to be there for others as they grieve. □

Stuart Segall lives about an hour north of Seattle. He has spent most of his adult life counseling, encouraging, inspiring and uplifting others.



Prodigal Sons

Bless the Lord who crowns you with tender mercies (Psalm 103, NKJV).

When Gigi Graham Tchividjian, daughter of Billy and Ruth Graham, was pregnant with her second child she was in the Swiss Alps with her mother on Mother's Day. *"I awoke early that Sunday morning to the sound of bells," she recalls. "It was one of those indescribable spring days that can only be experienced in the Alps." The "window boxes hanging from every window in the village... were a riot of color, almost gaudy in the extravagance—red and pink geraniums, yellow and orange marigolds, blue ageratum and petunias of every variety! A perfect setting for Mother's Day."*

As a mother, I also look back to a perfect Mother's Day in completely different circumstances—not as a mother spending time with a grown daughter. Rather as a single mother with an adolescent son.

It was May in Michigan. As soon as we arrived home from church, Carlton and I quickly changed our clothes. After packing a picnic lunch, we drove—with dog in tow—to the nearly vacated sprawling campus of Grand Valley State University to hike along the ravines jutting out along the Grand River. Virginia blue bells and buttercups were in full bloom. Trillium and May flowers lined the winding path up to the pine forest. Then a lunch of sandwiches, chips, and fruit—not forgetting the dog treats.

For mothers who look forward to six-course dinners and floral arrangements, this offered little elegance. Nor did it have an old-world touch complete with "the tinkling of cowbells" and "glorious snow-covered peaks." But my memories have turned those hours into nothing short of a Swiss Alps experience—a perfect setting for Mother's Day.

But there have been many other days, including those designated to honor Mothers, where *painful* is a more accurate

adjective than *perfect*. Carlton was never outwardly rebellious. He didn't want to disappoint me. But there were years, one after another, when trouble was only a temptation away.

This was true of Ruth Graham's sons as well. She wrote of that pain and anguish in her memoir *Prodigals—and Those Who Love Them*. *"As Franklin grew older, I'd get calls from the police," she remembered. But the problems were not just with her oldest son. Ned was the baby of the family. "He was a loving child," she recalled, "but he also went through a period where he was involved with drugs. Looking back on it, it seems like just a few weeks ago. But it dragged on for years."*

She tells how she was lying awake one night worrying about Ned. Tossing and turning, she finally got out of bed and reached for her Bible. She opened it to Philippians 4.

The verse was familiar: *"In nothing be anxious, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God."*

She knew the verse by heart, but there in that night hour she saw it in a different light. She was startled by two words that she had not previously noticed—with *thanksgiving*.

"Suddenly I realized the missing ingredient to my prayers had been thanksgiving. So I sat there and thanked God for all that Ned was and all he had meant to me through the years." Previously her prayer had been, *"Lord, help me discipline this boy."* Now she was thanking God for all his good qualities.

With thanksgiving. Two words. Tender mercies. She turned out the light and fell asleep.

When I read about Franklin and Ned Graham, Ruth's story became my own. I too tossed and turned during many sleepless nights. Her discovery of these two little words brought *tender mercies* to me at a time when I most needed them. □

—Ruth Tucker



Quotes & Connections



"When you build a ship, then do not drum the men together in order to procure wood, to give instructions or to distribute the work, but teach them longing for the wide, endless sea."
—Antoine de Saint-Exupery

"Oh to be half as wonderful as my child thought I was when he was small, and half as stupid as my teenager now thinks I am."
—Anonymous

"Tears are how your heart speaks when your lips cannot describe how much we've been hurt, but it is your words that gave me courage. It became the light that would guide me towards the right path again."
—Jellal Fernandes

"Motherhood: All love begins and ends there."
—Robert Browning

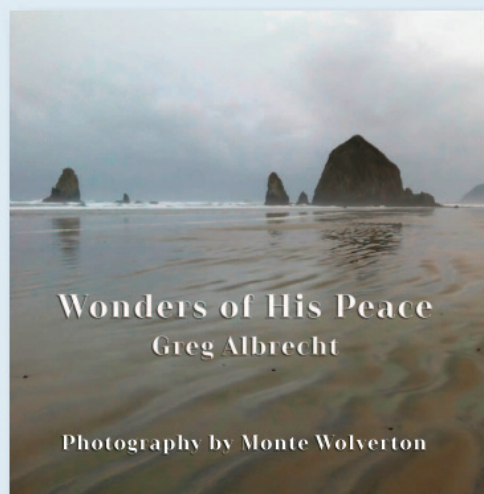
"A mother is she who can take the place of all others but whose place no one else can take."
—Cardinal Meymillod

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