

Humble

BY LISA A. SMITH

“MOM, WE SAW A MOOSE!” my kids yelled as they raced inside our house. Not what I wanted to hear, this had happened while they were riding their bikes around our street and cul-de-sac. I wondered how they’d handled it without me there.

“What did you do?”

“Oh, we got off our bikes!”

“Good!”

“We climbed the ladder on the neighbor’s RV!”

“Why didn’t you just go behind a tree? Moose can’t see well.”

“Mom, moose can’t climb ladders.”

Since this was a good point, I simply made some mental notes: 1. Apologize to neighbor for RV climb. 2. Thank Jesus that my kids have respect for wildlife.

We live in Alaska, where even in urban areas, outdoor preparedness and wildlife know-how are parts of daily life. This magnificent, wild place has several national parks bigger than the state of Delaware, some with just a few miles of developed trails and very few facilities. Even in established parks and preserves, a wise traveler must be ready for inclement weather, wildlife and first-aid emergencies. I once took an out-of-state friend on a hike just outside Anchorage. As the trail ascended to a rocky, exposed cliff, my friend moaned, “Where is the guard rail? In Iowa, there would be a guard rail!”

It’s tempting to brag about the extremes of living in Alaska, but this vast, grand and dangerous place has lessons to teach. For instance, Alaska has taught me humility. Hopefully, my children are learning it too. This kind of humility has a lot to do with a deep respect for the created world, as well as

for the One who created it.

Sometimes that humility looks like stopping to admire the world God made and saying a prayer of thanks that I get to see it. At other times, that humility looks like realizing that a stream crossing, back-country ski run, or stretch of river might not be safe right now, so you need to stop to live, hike, ski or paddle another day. Of course, sometimes people who’ve done everything right still face a tragic outcome. When I moved here, I was told that if I stayed long enough, eventually I would know people who died in a small-plane crash, a boating accident or an avalanche (true).

I moved to Alaska (the first time) by ferry and car. It took about a week to travel by boat from Bellingham, Washington, to Haines, Alaska, and then drive two days (and through a sliver of Canada) to reach my destination: a 12-month pastoral internship in a congregation here. It was a good way to get a sense of Alaska’s diversity and immense size. The landmass is so big, you could fit Texas in twice and still have room for some New England states. I ferried by and drove past fjords, rainforests, boreal forests, mountain ranges, alpine lakes, rivers and national forest land. There was rain, wind and sun. A month later, while I was camping with some new friends, a water bottle froze solid—inside my tent. The following week, we hiked up a mountain into a snowfall. That was mid-September. These early lessons taught me about the grandeur of this place and the humility required in the face of its wildness.

A “RIGHT SIZE” FRAMEWORK

I’ve been reading author Daryl Van Tongeren’s

Humble: Free Yourself from the Traps of a Narcissistic World. In this book, the author defines humility as “knowing yourself, checking yourself and going beyond yourself.” Humility, he adds, can be defined as “being the right size” or not thinking too much or too little of yourself.

This framework of humility has a lot to say about how we relate to the natural world that God has made. Does nature exist for us to “have dominion” over, as some have interpreted the command given to Adam and Eve in Genesis 1:28? Or can we use a more accurate translation for the word “dominion”: to tend and keep? This second orientation requires that we approach creation with a certain humility. Such a “right size” approach acknowledges that the earth is here for us to enjoy, not to destroy. We are not the only ones on this planet. God cares about the rest of life—which also was created good.

Another kind of humility comes with realizing that I was not here first. Indigenous peoples of Alaska have tended this land for generations, long before the United States “purchased” it from Russia in 1867. (Side note: No one asked the Indigenous people who already lived there what they thought of this transaction.)

Recently, while in an airport, I chatted with an Inupiat elder from an ELCA congregation on Alaska’s Seward Peninsula, near Nome. We made small talk and spoke about the weather. Yet for this ELCA member, it wasn’t small talk. It wasn’t just the weather. For him, it’s a traditional way of knowing that informs subsistence living. The elder described how he watches clouds to predict wind direction and precipitation. He told me that although younger generations now look at their weather apps, he still watches the clouds, as his ancestors did. Weather and ice patterns, observed over time, give hunters information about animal behaviors and migration. But as the earth’s climate changes, those observations become less dependable.

For a long time, scientists exhibited little humility about the traditional knowledge many Indigenous peoples have of the natural world. But signs of hope and humility are emerging: A recent study in the journal *Arctic Science* included more than 10,000 Indigenous observations of the changing environment (read the Alaska Dispatch News story at <https://tinyurl.com/bddr77t9>). The project tracked Arctic changes and documents related to Indigenous wisdom.

Practicing humility helps us take a “right size” approach to the natural world and to other cultures. But humility can be found (or not) in parenting, too. You may have heard of the “humble brag,” where someone pretends to be humble but is really bragging. It’s showboating disguised with a complaint: “Yeah, my kid is really struggling in algebra; she only got a 95% on that test!” or “My toddler is so boring. All he eats is kale and organic, free-range eggs.”

I want to humble-brag that my kids are wilderness-ready adventurers who know what to do if, next time, they encounter, say, a bear. But honestly, they’re constantly losing their water bottles, and they’d probably panic and run from a grizzly. Just as faith, reading, swimming and any essential life skills require practice and time, it also takes practice over time to build up skills of humility. According to Van Tongeren, one way to grow in humility is to seek out diverse viewpoints. You can learn something from the way others do things, and sometimes even change your mind.

Yet Van Tongeren says humility starts with knowing your own worth and value. That way, you don’t constantly strive for outside affirmation (making you less happy and less humble). Thank God that our faith gives us that grounding! We are of infinite worth and value to God, who loves us, calls us by name and places us in the world God made for us to tend and enjoy. 🌸

When we know better, we do better

BY LISA A. SMITH

A WHILE BACK, ONE OF MY CHILDREN WAS STRUGGLING with some behaviors that I thought might indicate a mental health issue. It created a challenging situation at home; it upset our daily life. I didn't know where to turn.

First, I talked to his elementary school teacher. She said he was doing great in school and had no issues. Then I tried our school principal, to see what resources were available. She reminded me that our school had no guidance counselor due to district staffing and funding issues. Things had to be approaching self-harm to get the district psychologist involved. It wasn't *that* bad at home, but we still had challenges. I tried our pediatrician, who recommended a counselor who wasn't helpful. Finally, after a 12-month wait, we were able to meet with a play therapist who helped us craft parenting and home life strategies to support our son. When you know better, you do better. Now we're all doing better.

The one person I didn't think to contact was our pastor. Why? Partly because I suspected the play therapist would be the right fit (she was), but also because I was embarrassed. I felt my child should be better behaved. I felt it might be my fault. Maybe I wasn't a good enough parent. I hesitated to reach out to our church family about a mental health issue. I know it would have been different if my child had broken an arm. But why?

Children's mental health has received greater attention in national news lately. Some call it a crisis. According to the 2023 Mental Health America

Report, more than 16 percent of youth aged 12 to 17 report suffering from at least one major depressive episode in the past year. Of those youth with depression, about 60 percent do not receive mental health treatment. Although these problems have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, they are not new. A 2022 report from U.S. Surgeon General Vivek Murthy reveals that, even in the years before the pandemic, as many as 1 in 5 American children aged 3 to 17 experienced a mental, emotional, developmental or behavioral health disorder. Those numbers may be even higher among historically marginalized populations and LGBTQ+ youth.

Why would I feel so bad about having such a common concern? Even though stigma remains, talking about mental health challenges is becoming more common. My kids talk openly about friends who have autism or ADHD. An adult family friend has ADHD and anxiety; my children know that she takes medication to manage it all. Normalizing these diagnoses has created more acceptance.

How do we talk about mental health with children? I was feeling anxious just before we took my son to see the counselor for the first time. Based on helpful advice from our pediatrician and parenting websites, I told my son that we see helpers and doctors for all kinds of things. Everyone needs help sometimes, I said. This "feelings doctor" was going to help us talk about some big feelings. I shared with my son that several times in my adult life, going to see a feelings doctor (counselor) has helped me.

As caregivers, we can name the range of feelings that we experience and encourage children to name those feelings too. We can also invite children to bring their feelings to God in prayer. God welcomes all feelings and loves us no matter how we feel.

We can open the Bible to the Psalms—a great resource for those struggling with mental health, alongside medical and therapeutic care as needed. These 150 songs encompass feelings from ecstatic joy and praise to a fiery rage that calls for the destruction of one's enemies. Psalms voice words of comfort and assurance, as well as deep lament. The range of human emotions is welcome. None of this is too much for God, who has heard it all before and responds with love and welcome.

Churches can support youth mental health by destigmatizing challenges. Preachers can mention mental health in sermons. Congregations can promote local mental health fairs and community resources. Leaders can offer general prayers (keeping people's names and medical information private) for people who live with mental health challenges. One pastor I know is open about her own struggles with anxiety and depression, sharing this appropriately on social media. All these efforts lift the veil of secrecy and shame. People begin to understand that they are not wrong to feel this way, and that help is available.

You can find great resources for mental health on the US Surgeon General's priority page on youth mental health (<https://bit.ly/SG-mental-health-youth>), and on the website of the National Alliance for Mental Illness (www.nami.org). These can be made available in the home and in the congregation.

One interesting thing about living through a mental health challenge with my child has been connecting with other parents who've been there. At first, I felt as though it was just me. What a sigh of

relief, to be able to say to friends with adult children, college friends or clergy friends, "My kid also struggles with this," and feel seen.

I've thought a lot about ways to better support my family's mental health. Recently, I listened to a podcast on "mom rage." The presenter said "mom rage" is often triggered by unmet needs. Caregivers, especially women, who are socialized to serve others, tend to put their needs on the back burner. That's not good for mental health. When adults attend to their own mental health needs (self-care, good boundaries, time for rest, support when needed), they can better support the mental health of children in their care.

We can encourage children's mental health through active listening, validating their feelings and working together to develop ways to cope with challenges. We can also establish daily routines, plan shared activities and spend time in nature.

Our children's emotional and mental wellness matters just as much as their physical health. When we know better, we do better. 🌻



Getting it right (or not) with kids' faith questions

BY LISA A. SMITH

"Will God and Jesus ever die?"

"When will Jesus come back to earth?"

"Why did God make flowers?"

"Is everyone in heaven a grown-up?"

"Why can't people come back from heaven?"

EIGHT YEARS AGO, I opened a Word document to record the questions my kids asked me about God and faith. The above list is a sample. Four years ago, I began blogging about their questions. My youngest child is now the age that my oldest was when I started, so I'm having some of the same conversations again. In some ways, it gets easier. In other ways, it never does.

Those who extol the simple faith of a child may not have spent enough time with one. Child-like faith is layered, complicated and evolving—like faith at any age. Children ask questions that are real, persistent, piercing and insightful. Often, I admit that I just don't know the answers, but that we'll look for them together. I'm learning to say less and to listen more.

Now when I think about children's faith questions (or any questions, really), I think about the unspoken questions behind them—questions about safety, worth and longing, questions that even grownups have. *Will I be safe? Will someone care for me? Am I worthy of love?* So many other concerns exist under our faith questions.

As with all types of development, things beyond our control can impact faith development. I once served on the board of a children's residential

treatment center, where staff used a trauma-informed approach. Children come in with what often look like "bad behaviors" but are almost always the result of unspeakable trauma: violence in the home, sexual abuse, neglect and more. Instead of saying to a child, "What's wrong with you?" staff members at that treatment center say, "What happened to you?" From there, healing begins.

We can use this approach in healing ourselves too. When we connect to our inner child, we may find some woundedness. Researchers have learned that when we go through adverse childhood experiences, we continue to carry these in our bodies. The effects can be deeper than we realize, impacting us emotionally, socially, spiritually, and even physically, into adulthood. What's more, the adaptive behaviors we learned as children, behaviors that may have served us at that time, don't serve us anymore.

Scripture alludes to childhood (but not necessarily children's questions) on a few occasions, including at least twice in Mark's gospel. In Mark 9, Jesus places a child in front of the disciples, who have just been arguing about who among them is greatest. Jesus tells them to welcome children. In Mark 10, the disciples (who clearly didn't listen in the last chapter) are stopping people from bringing their children to Jesus for a blessing. But Jesus tells them to bring the children to him. He blesses them and adds that those who don't receive the kingdom of God as a child will never enter it (10:15).

Sometimes these scenes can have a "Precious Moments" feel to them. However, children in

antiquity weren't viewed the way we see children now. None of these parents were running their children to piano lessons or signing them up for academic clubs to get ahead (see my weekly planner). Back then, children were of lower status. Children were property. Their purpose was to work, to marry, and to care for older family members as they aged. Jesus' embrace and welcome of children would have been stunning—in line with Jesus' embrace of "the least of these." It serves as a reminder that God is experienced not in power, but in weakness.

Parenting and caregiving are hard tasks. We face difficult questions and complex issues. Faith intermingles with doubt. We trip over our own guilt and worry. Some days we get it right. We have days when we blow it. Our kids are complex individuals; so are we.

So much of my early parenting years were about trying to get it right: the right answers, the right choices, the right attitude, even the right outfits. I still try to do a good job. (I don't care about the outfits anymore.) But now I think more in terms of repair than the crushing expectation of getting everything right the first time.

Child clinical psychologist Becky Kennedy's book *Good Inside* is based on the premise that kids and caregivers are "good inside." Our kids want to do what is good. We can help them by focusing on connection and understanding their needs, while still setting boundaries, Kennedy writes. When we mess up—because we absolutely will—we can forgive ourselves and repair the relationship. According to Kennedy, it's never too late to become the person and/or parent you want to be. We are good inside. If that's not a theology of grace, I don't know what is.

We can trust in God's promise to be present in our moments of faith, as well as in our questions and doubts. We can trust that God is there for our kids in such times too. 🌸

