

# Welcomes Are Good

## Can you recall your first day at a new job or school?

How about the first time you met your prospective in-laws? Do you recall how awkward everything seemed until someone made you feel welcome? You can probably still remember the people who first made you feel at home in those situations.



Welcoming others and making a place for them is not only good manners—it's a religious act as well. Jesus told the disciples that to feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, and welcome the stranger was to care for and welcome Jesus himself.

This week, think about the welcomes you give and the welcomes you receive. Pay particular attention to how welcome you make your child feel, especially when life is busy and you are facing many demands. Realize that the first gift we're meant to give the children in our care is to receive them well—as the unique and wonderful people God made them.

—Tom McGrath, author of *Raising Faith-Filled Kids* (Loyola Press)



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# Names Are Good

**The way we say someone's name can show that we love them.** Or it can make them feel like a villain. Do you remember the TV series *Seinfeld*? Every time Jerry ran into his neighbor from down the hall, he would sneer, "Newman." Newman was the villain of the show, and the way Jerry said his name conveyed it. We should be careful with names and how we use them.



We all hope for respect, and so we must offer it. One of the surest ways to show respect is to say one another's names with kindness and care—even when we are angry. Respecting others indicates our recognition that we are all made in the image of God. We must remember that those closest to us, including our children, need to know we respect them too.

How would you define the word *love*? A five-year-old once responded to that question by saying, "When somebody loves you, your name is safe in their mouth." To take this week's lesson to heart, make sure the names of your family members are safe in your mouth. Then show the same or greater care for the names we use for God.

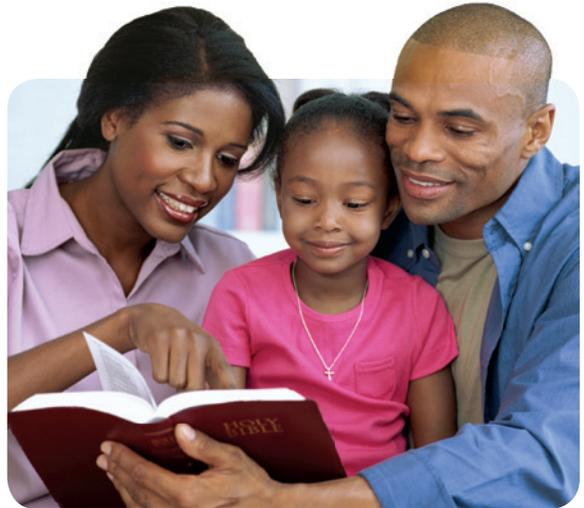
—Tom McGrath, author of *Raising Faith-Filled Kids* (Loyola Press)



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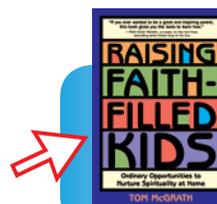
# Stories Are Good

**People love stories.** We read them. We watch them in movie theaters, in stage performances, on our devices, and on television. We listen to people tell stories on the radio and on our smartphones. We tell stories when we're gathered around water coolers, kitchen tables, and campfires. And we retell them when our extended family gets together.



Family stories carry within them deep beliefs about who we are and what we value. The Bible contains the stories of our family as children of God. It is a collection of stories and accounts of how God created us and acted throughout history to save us from bondage to sin. The Bible tells us who we are—God's own beloved children—and what we value: faithfulness, forgiveness, generosity, kindness, and many other loving qualities. The Bible tells us where we came from (the heart of God), where we are going (to live with God for all eternity), and how we will get there (by loving God and our fellow human beings and by following God's ways).

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# God's World Is Good

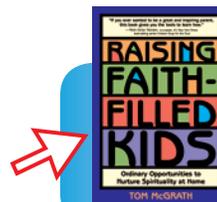
**I used to ride the “El,” Chicago’s elevated train, to my college classes.** On the way, I passed through neighborhoods that were in decline. I passed by once-grand apartment buildings that had seen better days. One year, as winter moved (tentatively, if you know Chicago at all) into spring, one of the apartment dwellers planted a window box with flowers.



As the days went by, the plants grew and the flowers blossomed, offering a sign of hope to passersby. Soon other neighbors put out their own window boxes, proving that a touch of nature—even in such small doses as window boxes full of flowers—can be healing and transforming.

We can learn many spiritual lessons by spending time appreciating God’s creation. The wonders of nature teach us that all creation is connected; that dying often leads to new and abundant life; and that having enough is better than constantly craving more. But perhaps the best reason to cultivate our appreciation of nature is that by doing so, we notice the subtle signs of God’s action in our own lives. Nature helps us become attuned to mystery and thus to the reality that there is more going on in the world than first meets the eye. There are wonders all around us if only we awaken to them.

—Tom McGrath, author of *Raising Faith-Filled Kids* (Loyola Press)



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# Quiet Is Good

## One year I gave up listening to the radio

**in the car for Lent.** It was one of the hardest things I've ever done. The first lesson it taught me was how noisy my mind was. The second lesson was how I used outside entertainment to drown out those noises in my head. But eventually that Lent, I actually began to value the silence and found it possible to really enter into silent prayer.

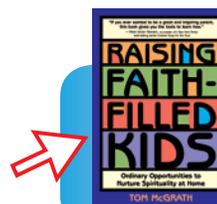


I began to enjoy those quiet times so much that even now I will occasionally turn off the radio or CD player in my car and treat myself to the gift of silence.

I suspect that, like me, many people who commit to adding more prayer to their lives still find it difficult initially to quiet their minds and hearts. They may offer themselves the excuse that they are not good at praying and dismiss the opportunity. But even the saints struggled with prayer. The difference is that they didn't stop praying when the going got tough. When your intention is right, calming yourself for prayer is even a kind of prayer in itself.

Silence may be an acquired taste, but the rewards are beyond measure. As Father Thomas Keating, O.C.S.O. ("Trappists"), says, "Silence is God's first language." Why not give yourself the chance to listen in?

—Tom McGrath, author of *Raising Faith-Filled Kids* (Loyola Press)



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# Talking to God Is Good

**I received probably my most powerful prayer lesson ever while looking out from the sacristy on my first day as an altar server.** I could see the people gathering for the 6:30 A.M. Mass. In the front pew, I saw my father, his head bowed, lost in prayer. Here was the man I viewed as the most powerful guy in the world, on his knees before God.

Growing up, I had no doubt that prayer was important to my parents, and as a result, I grew up knowing I could turn to God in every situation. In the same way, your example is a powerful way in which you influence your child's prayer life.

There are no experts at praying. Or maybe there are. Maybe everyone who thinks even the tiniest prayer is an expert. Your prayer can be as simple as uttering the words "God, help!" during a tough situation at work or "Thank you, God!" when a sick child returns to health. "Prayer is the raising of one's mind and heart to God," says the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. So raise your heart and your mind regularly. God looks forward to hearing from you.

—Tom McGrath, author of *Raising Faith-Filled Kids* (Loyola Press)



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# Families Are Good

**My most vivid image of family is when a dozen of my cousins and I crammed into a side bedroom at my grandparents' house on Thanksgiving.** There wasn't enough room for all of us kids at the big dining room table, so we had our own private dining room. There we laughed and told stories and got to know one another—everyone: those who lived close by and the cousins from far away.



Now, whenever we gather, whether it's joyously at a wedding or solemnly at a funeral, we share memories of Thanksgiving dinners tucked away in that private dining room. That's where we learned life lessons we'll never forget:

- Everyone belongs at the table.
- We'll always be family.
- We are loved.
- Gratitude brings us together.

Whether yours is a large, raucous family or just a few who gather around your table, families are gifts. When a family is healthy, loving, nurturing, and forgiving, it reflects the loving community of the Trinity.

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# I Am Good

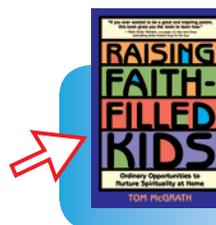
**Can you think of a significant person from your younger years who paid you a compliment that stuck with you?** Someone you respected who told you something about yourself that gave you a sense of your self-worth? Maybe it was a boss on your first job, a coach who noticed your drive and commitment, or a favorite relative who saw something special in you.



We all need “mirrors” in our lives—that is, people who can truly see us and so can reflect our goodness back to us. Our children need that positive mirroring from us too. They also need opportunities to put their talents and skills to use. They need to be able to exercise their virtues. This does not mean giving out manufactured compliments intended to artificially build up self-esteem. Self-esteem emerges naturally when we do “esteem-able” things.

So make a point of observing your child. Mirror back the good you see in him or her. And be sure to provide or call attention to a variety of opportunities for him or her to take virtuous and worthy action.

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# Growing Is Good

**In the house where I grew up, we had a spot in our back doorway where Mom and Dad would measure my brother's and my height.**

This took place every year on our birthdays. Our growth record remained visible as long as we lived there, because whenever Dad painted, he painted carefully around that strip.

The day we moved from that house, I took one last look at those penciled lines. Labeled with our initials and the dates of the measurements, the lines represented all the good times we'd had together in that home. They also represented all that my brother and I had learned about life, family, and ourselves as we grew.

Growth means life, and vice versa. Jesus said, "I came so that they might have life and have it more abundantly." (John 10:10) Your child is at a wondrous moment in his or her growth, and you have the privilege of witnessing that miracle as it unfolds. Make sure to stop once in a while and pay attention to how far your child has come. Appreciate all the wondrous opportunities that lie ahead. And don't forget to mark your own growth from time to time. Take stock of how you measure up physically, intellectually, emotionally, and spiritually. Are you taking Jesus up on his offer of more abundant life?

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# Thanking Is Good

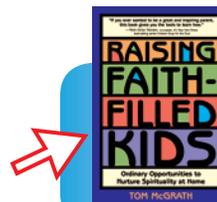
**In Moline, Illinois, Deacon Bob Vogelbaugh is known as “Mr. Thanksgiving.”** He once owned a small grocery store in town. One year, Bob was moved by the fact that many of his regular customers had no one with whom to celebrate Thanksgiving. So he hosted a dinner for about a dozen such people that year. The idea took off, and the feast grew year after year.



Recently, with the help of more than 400 volunteers, Vogelbaugh served 2,000 guests. Over the years he’s served up more than 40,000 Thanksgiving meals. When asked why he does this, Vogelbaugh points to his own sense of gratitude for all that God and his people have done for him through the years.

Gratitude is a fundamental building block of all spirituality. Cultivate gratitude, and you will see God’s gifts all around you. One of the best gifts we can give our children is the habit of being thankful for the life that we share as a family. The first step in teaching thankfulness is to model the attitude we hope they will assume. Seeing us as thankful, they will learn to be thankful too.

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# Preparing Is Good

**Whenever someone utters the phrase, “He had his heart set on it,” I think of Ralphie Parker.** Nine years old, Ralphie is the main character in the classic yuletide movie *A Christmas Story*. As Christmas approaches, Ralphie absolutely aches to own a toy he has seen on display at the local department store.

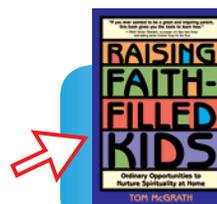
Ralphie knows his chances of receiving that particular toy are extremely slim, but (to borrow a phrase from Saint Paul) he nonetheless “hopes against hope.”

Every time I see that film, I ache right along with Ralphie, because I can readily recall a number of Decembers I spent pining for a toy electrically-powered car I could drive, a powerful telescope, or, when I was seven, a real pony.

If we’re lucky, we never lose the habit of such Advent yearning; we simply change the object of our longing. Instead of the big-screen TV, diamond necklace, or holiday cruise that we “know” will finally satisfy us, we learn to hope for a deeper experience with Jesus, the one who can truly make us whole, no matter what is under the tree.

Truth be told, aren’t most of the things we set our hearts on bound to be disappointing if we don’t have love at the center of our lives? That’s the gift the Christ Child embodies—self-giving love for one and all. That’s the gift to set your heart on through all the days of Advent.

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# Choosing Is Good

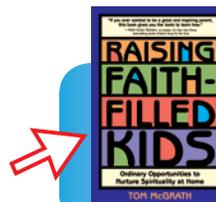
**Over the years, I've come to recognize the small decisions that loom large in my life at home.** Do I empty the dishwasher or leave it for someone else to do? Do I call when I'm going to be late? Do I think to send a no-special-occasion card to my wife, parents, or daughters during the year to say, "You're special to me every day"?



These seemingly small decisions are indicators of the healthiness of my commitments and relationships. If I'm withholding the small things, I know that in some way I'm also withholding my heart, which can have potentially large consequences.

The same is true with God. Do I make time for God at the beginning of the day? Do I thank him throughout the day for all the help he sends my way? Do I look for the presence of God in others and treat them accordingly? If you focus on small choices that open your heart, your relationships with your family and with God will reap giant rewards.

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# Shepherds Are Good

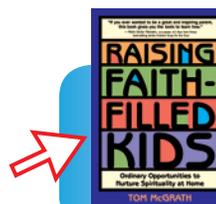
**You probably have many opportunities to serve as a good shepherd, starting with the child in your care.** It's important, then, not to leave your interactions with that person on autopilot. As you rush from activity to activity, chore to chore, stop occasionally to be aware of where you are, who you are with, and what you are doing.



Here's a trick to help increase your awareness. The next time you and your child are doing something as simple as picking up toys and straightening up the family room, imagine yourself many years in the future, looking back on this moment. From that vantage point, what seems important about this moment? It probably isn't the orderliness of the family room as much as it is the time spent with this precious child at this time in his or her life.

Life in a family is busy and demanding. It's also a time of miracles. Make it your spiritual goal to find ways to be mindful so that the busyness and demands of your day-to-day life don't make you miss the miracles.

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# Hearts Are Good

**Think of all the books, movies, TV shows, songs, and soap operas whose dramatic tension arises from two people on the verge of falling in love.** They capture and convey a longing that seems universal. The whole world seems to hold its breath and anticipate love erupting in their lives.

This longing is holy. It manifests our desire to know and experience God's love for us. God placed this desire to know, love, and serve him deep in our hearts. God also sent his Son, the embodiment of divine love, as the true response to our deepest longing.

As parents, we are in a position to teach our children about love by simply loving them. At our best, we model the love of God in our own love. When we tend to our children when they're sick, listen to them when they're troubled, share their joy during play, and nurture their bodies, minds, and souls, we are preparing them to live lives of love. They become ready to expect God's love and are more likely to see signs of it all around them.

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# Hands Are Good

**My mother turned 80 recently—an occasion for a lot of reminiscing.** One thing all our memories shared in common was that in every story, Mom was usually busy doing some kind of service for others.

But as we thought further, no matter how serious the cause for which they were working, Mom and her friends always made sure they had fun. Even now, her calendar is peppered with volunteering at a hospital thrift store, leading religious education sessions with special-needs children, and taking care of just about any other need that surfaces at her local parish.

Now I see this same pattern woven into the lives of her children and grandchildren. Children learn a lot by osmosis—by absorbing what’s present in their environment. As parents, it’s easy to get caught up in doing for our children. And that is necessary and good. But we also owe them the example of doing for others in a spirit of joyful generosity. Their little eyes are watching.

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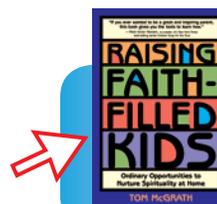
# Forgiveness Is Good

**Did you ever play hot potato?** It's fun and exciting to pass along the object as fast as you can. But have you ever handled an actual hot baked potato from the oven?

Sometimes families treat feelings like literal hot potatoes. When an uncomfortable emotion arises, each person tries to pass that charged feeling to someone else.

There are three steps families can take to short-circuit the hot potato game. One, be aware of your own emotions. Two, ask for God's help in responding to the emotions you find the most troublesome. Three, don't *react*. *Respond*. Responding means you don't just pass along the emotional charge. Instead, you might calmly say, "It sounds as though you are upset. Let's figure out what you're feeling." If your child expresses his or her emotions in a way that goes against your values, use that as a teachable moment. Say, "We don't talk to one another like that. It's okay to have your feelings, but it's not okay to be mean."

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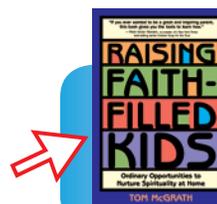
# Church Is Good

**No matter what time of the day or night, somewhere around the world, people are gathering in Catholic churches to celebrate the Eucharist.** People are also joining together everywhere as Christians to feed the hungry, heal the sick, tend to the brokenhearted, and preach the Good News.

What is the Church? It is as simple as a family saying their mealtime prayers together. It's as complex as the gathering of cardinals from all over the globe, representing every ethnic group and culture, deliberating on the great moral issues of the day. The Church is a group of people who share a common set of beliefs. It's a movement as well as a mission. The Church is the Body of Christ.

For most of us, the word *church* begins with a small *c* and makes us think of our local parish church—the place we gather to hear the Word of God and be fed by the Bread of Life. But remember that you yourself are the Church with a capital *C*. You are called to bring the light of Christ wherever you go—including to your own home.

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# Meals Are Good

**Do you want to strengthen your family?** Eat meals together.

Studies show that children whose families eat together regularly get better grades, enjoy better nutrition, and have a lower incidence of drug use and other problematic behavior. They're also more likely to practice their faith.



When we come together at the kitchen table, we bring not only our physical hunger, but also our social, emotional, and spiritual hunger. At the family meal, all these hungers are fed. In a time when children are being tossed about on the stormy seas of life, the family meal provides an anchor within a safe harbor—the family.

But the biggest benefit of the family meal is that it prepares us to come together to the table of the Lord in the Eucharist. The more we are present to one another at our own kitchen tables, the more we will be able to experience the real presence of Jesus in the Eucharist.

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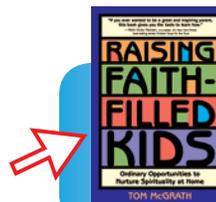
# Seeds Are Good

**Each day as I walked to the train, I saw a dandelion pushing its way up through a crack in the sidewalk.** Others may have seen it as a blight on the landscape, but I took it as a sign of hope.

This dandelion was growing outside an abandoned warehouse. The warehouse once bustled with activity, but now it stood silent. It was a difficult time in my own life, a time when I felt stymied and uncertain about my own future. And yet here, bursting forth from the smallest crack in the concrete, was a bright yellow dandelion, defying all odds. Somehow that spunky little plant was the symbol of courage and perseverance I needed.

New life springs up all around us—in our gardens, in our children, in our neighborhoods, and in ourselves. God continually offers you the gift of new life. Open your heart to it today.

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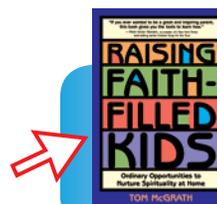
# Butterflies Are Good

**In his wonderful book *The Sign of the Cross*, Bert Ghezzi recounts a story of author Alexander Solzhenitsyn's exile in a Soviet prison camp.** One day, after months of hard labor, little food, and numbing cold, Solzhenitsyn left the line of workers and sat down. He knew that soon a guard would come and command him back to work. If he refused, it would mean a swift death, yet that seemed preferable to continuing.

Instead of a guard, though, a butterfly came along. It took the form of an old prisoner who came and knelt before Solzhenitsyn. Using a stick, the man scratched out the shape of a cross in the dirt. Ghezzi writes, "Solzhenitsyn looked at the cross, and as he reflected on it, a ray of light penetrated his dark thoughts. In that moment his perspective changed radically. He realized that he did not have to face the evil of the gulag and the Soviets on his own diminished strength. With the power of the Cross, he could withstand the evil of not one but a thousand Soviet empires." Solzhenitsyn experienced not death, but rebirth.

In our Baptism, we have been united with Christ's Death and Resurrection. Through his Cross, Jesus freed us from slavery to sin and death and became the source of eternal life. We are called to take up our own cross in the dyings and risings that are part of our everyday life. (Bert Ghezzi, *The Sign of the Cross*. Loyola Press, 2004.)

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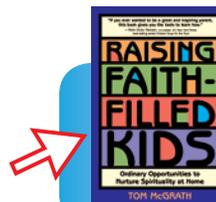
# Light Is Good

**When you were young, did you sing the song that began, “This little light of mine, I’m gonna let it shine”?** You might sing it now with your child. The message is a good one—one you can practice every day.

Jesus said to his first followers, “You are the light of the world.” He said we shouldn’t hide our light, but should let it shine before all. To be the light of the world, the source of your illumination must be God. The closer you allow yourself to be to God, the more his light will shine through you for the good of all.

Sometimes we hide our light under the bushel basket of preoccupations, worries, insecurities, impatience, or other temporary moods. Think of how you greet your family members each day. Does your light shine on them? Or is it hidden beneath your daily concerns and cares? Pray today that God will help you let your light shine to warm your family and help them grow in the light of God’s love.

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# Celebrating Is Good

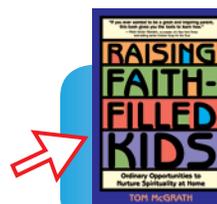
**And the band sang, “Celebrate good times, come on!”** We were at a family wedding, and everyone was on the dance floor. Old and young, limber and lame, great dancers and klutzes, we all joined the dance, and everyone belonged.

My wife and I were dancing with our young daughters, but we knew we were really dancing with the whole extended family, and it felt like we were dancing with every person in the world. In that moment I sensed the oneness that Jesus prayed we might all know.



Celebrating is a deeply human trait. People, unlike God’s other earthly creatures, celebrate. We celebrate birthdays and weddings, anniversaries and achievements. In doing so, we grow in awareness that all good gifts—love, fidelity, longevity, and life itself—come from God. Make sure to celebrate family events both large and small. Be aware of the One who makes it all possible.

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# Air Is Good

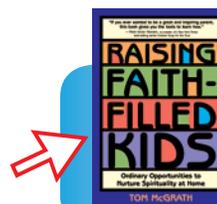
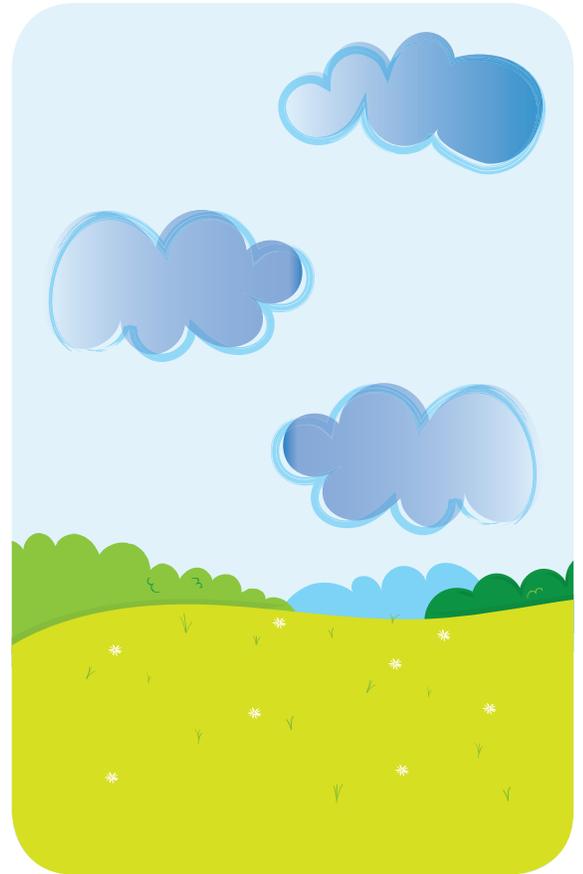
**“First, take a few deep breaths.”** That was some of the best advice I’ve ever received. It came from a mentor, whenever I’d call on him with some frantic question. That’s what he would say.

I’ve used that advice during difficult moments at work, at home, and even before I walk up to serve as lector at my parish on Sundays. Breathe. Simply breathe.

Being aware of your breathing is a great tool for getting out of worry and into the present moment. There’s nothing more immediate and essential to life than inhaling and exhaling. Consciousness of your breathing can be a helpful prayer practice as well. It’s a way to be present in the now and open to the God who dwells within us.

How close to us is God? In the second account of the creation of human beings (Genesis 2:7), God breathed into Adam’s nostrils the breath of life. God didn’t just breathe air into the man. What God breathed into Adam was divine life. The Holy Spirit flows through us each moment of our lives. The more we realize just how close God chooses to be to us, the easier it will be to live accordingly.

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# Joy Is Good

**When I think of the word *joy*, I think of my elderly neighbor walking hand in hand with his three-year-old granddaughter.**

They are walking to the park together. As they toddle along, she is wonderstruck by all she sees.

As for my neighbor, he beams with joy at her presence in his life. Before her arrival in the world, he was a gruff guy—a hard-nosed sales manager who barked orders at those around him. Now we see the softer side of our neighbor. He has joy in his life, and it has transformed him.

Joy can transform us too. The world encourages us to grasp at pleasure. But joy isn't to be pursued; it arrives as a gift. It is there to be received. All we need to do is make room for it. Maybe that means sometimes slowing our hectic pace. Maybe that means leaning down to hold the hand of innocence. Tonight, spend a few moments silently watching your child sleep as you let joy swell into your life.

—Tom McGrath, author of *Raising Faith-Filled Kids* (Loyola Press)



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# Life Is Good

**“Ahh, now this is really living.”** That was my dad: when we stood fishing on his summer-house pier shortly after dawn; when we walked along the golf-course fairway on a crisp fall day; or right before we said grace before a holiday meal with the whole family gathered together.



The lesson we learned from his frequent pronouncement that “this is really living” is that life is meant to be savored. I think my father had an especially keen appreciation for life because of his job. He worked for 42 years at a Catholic cemetery, and he compassionately stood by those who mourned every working day of his life. He knew the preciousness and meaning the reality of death adds to life. He also believed deeply that for those who have passed on in faith, life has not ended. It has only changed.

What is “really living” for you? What can you do in your own life and in the life of your family to cultivate a deeper appreciation of the gift of life? Always savor that gift.

—Tom McGrath, author of *Raising Faith-Filled Kids* (Loyola Press)



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