

one dad

encountering God

Brad Lincoln

*For Joshua, Zoë and Jed, who teach me so much—
not least that simple pleasures outweigh complex problems.
Thank you.*



Preface

Why?

God speaks to us every day but we don't know how to listen.

Mahatma Gandhi

I live 'a life of quiet desperation'. I am weaker than I want ever to admit. I want so much to be peaceful, to be fulfilled, to be whole. My day-to-day life, however, brings manifold reminders of my failure to live up to my own mediocre standards—far short of Jesus' benchmark.

I want, unrealistically, to be a perfect friend and husband and disciple and son. I am not. I am an unremarkable man. I am a father.

Even so, I've had the great pleasure and privilege to do some unusual things, and I believe that some of my experiences have encouraged me to take a new perspective on the world I meet. Living as a missionary in Nepal for a number of years helped me to develop a better understanding of what it is to have and what it is to be without, and the TV-less evenings gave me time to reflect on the challenges with which real poverty assaulted me. In the same way, having three children of my own forced me to consider and appreciate more the parenting I myself had received. In some cases these experiences were combined, such as learning to speak Nepali while watching my first child grasping at his first words, and often the struggles in one would amplify the wonder of the other.

I would sometimes find it easier to understand these

moments by jotting them down. I write—not just this book—for that reason. My motives are not selfless. I write not to leave a legacy or to make my parents proud; not to communicate any truths or wisdom I may have gained or to give anyone the benefit of what little I know or understand. I write because writing expresses me. In spilling out my thoughts, I hope somehow to learn, to process what is inside, to earn some inner calm. Many times I may blame my children for robbing me of moments of reflection with their interruptions, but I find that when the quietness does come, it is the moments with them that I reflect on most.

I write, also, because for some reason that is how I pray. I write down even my daily prayers, expecting no one ever to read them. I write because it allows me to hurl myself on to a blank page and make myself vulnerable. I write in the hope that at least God will understand.

If I truly am unremarkable, then I must assume that many others, some who would rather read than write, also feel a certain dissatisfaction. I offer this book to all who want so much in this life, who are greedy for answers and know deep within that there is more. I hope you, like me, believe that, with all other avenues explored, it can only be God who holds out the promise of a life worth living. In this life I am temporarily comforted, I have brief insights, I have flashes of joy and precious moments of love. I choose to believe that these are glimpses of the divine and that life with God offers to fit these jigsaw pieces together, to make me perfect and whole.

I have come to the conclusion that only God can lift me out of the ordinary. I am impatient for his answers.

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Introduction

What if?

My Me is God, nor do I recognise any other Me except my God Himself.

Saint Catherine of Genoa

How would my life be different if I really understood God?

What if, instead of a muddle of ideas and half-thought-through concepts jumbled together, a mess of Sunday school images and media caricatures, I carried around inside my head a real concrete image of God that I could relate to?

OK, maybe God is far too complex and beautiful and powerful for me to really get a mental image of him. So what if, in the same way that Jesus used simple metaphors to explain concepts of the kingdom of heaven, I had a simple metaphor that at least communicated the key points to me?

Oh, sure, I'd have to accept that the simple metaphor would not be a comprehensive picture of God and the way he relates to me, but if it just pointed me in the right direction, wouldn't that help?

If there was such a metaphor, it would have to be something I understood fully, something I grasped intimately. It would also have to be an image I could carry with me at all times, familiar but also able to show me a new facet of God whenever I took a moment to look past its familiarity to see what it might be telling me about him. What if God gave me something like that to help me decipher him?

If he did, it would need to be a picture that involved

relationship with another being, so that I could use it to understand a little better how he relates to people. No, wait—what if I could use it to understand what he might be saying to me?

So I'm looking for a metaphor in which one element is (perhaps imperfectly) displaying qualities of God, such as power and knowledge and control and discipline, to another element that is somehow less in all of those areas. I know that God is love,¹ so the 'bigger' element has to show love for the lesser element of the metaphor, and that love must be the closest thing to perfect love that I can comprehend, mustn't it?

Now that I think about it, it occurs to me that so much of life is about emotions, so God would have to give me a picture that I could really feel as well as know first-hand. Then I'd want to talk to others about the metaphor, to discuss it, to chew it over, so that I could get others' views and insights on the concepts it showed me. So it would have to be an image that everyone, or almost everyone, could relate to, like the sun or water—something universal.

If only God had given us a metaphor like that. Wouldn't it be great?

But what if he already has? What if it's here somewhere, if only I could find it?

What if it was so close to me that I could touch it? In fact, what if it was so close to me that it was inside me?

It would have to be something so simple and so universal—like being a father, or being a child.

Given that God is everywhere and in everything, perhaps birds and bees, mountains and marmosets, clouds and ocean

¹ 1 John 4:16

currents might provide sufficient material to reflect upon. If I had enough direct experience, maybe I could have developed a deeper understanding of God by considering them? But it just so happens that I have spent more time in the last eight-and-a-half years being a father than anything else, and even though that is nowhere near enough to make me a fathering expert, perhaps it has at least given me the rich source of experiences I need to tap into. What I do know is that being a father is a gift from God² and could be the closest I will ever get to understanding how he feels about me.

From the very first seconds of fatherhood—the sublime mixture of relief at the safe delivery of a healthy baby and an overwhelming sense of new responsibility—I’ve been made aware of a new world. If God feels that way about me, then I suspect he has been taking a closer interest in me than I normally give him credit for.

What if, in my own fatherhood, he has given me the perfect explanation of himself?

I pray that through these reflections you get a sense of him and his fatherhood.

² Psalm 127:3



Chapter One

Knowing God

Knowing

Real knowledge is to know the extent of one's ignorance.

Confucius

I don't think I know God that well at all. I've met him—not as often as I would like, but we've had our encounters; we have a relationship. It's not as close as it should be. We spend time together—which is to say that I spend a lot of time looking for him—but sometimes I'm not sure if I meet him. Occasionally, very occasionally, I hear him with crystal clarity, but again, not as often as I'd like. More frequently, when I think I've heard his voice I have a vague suspicion that it might be an echo of my own—or, worse, the voice of someone deliberately misleading me. You'd think, after all this time, I would know what he sounded like but, no, I don't think I could say that I actually *know* God very well at all.

There have been times in my Christian journey, mostly early on, when I said that I knew him, but I always felt slightly uncomfortable when I did so. It felt as though I was using the word 'know' in a different way, almost as if it was another piece of jargon in the Christian lexicon that we all have to learn when we start attending church, going to house groups and reading daily Bible study notes. I *know* my wife, my children, my sister, my parents, and I know precisely what I mean when I say that. In most situations I know pretty

much what my wife is thinking, and I love that. I can look at her back—perhaps as she is washing dishes at the sink—and, by the way she is standing, the way she holds her shoulders or by the way she brushes some hair back from her face, I know how she is feeling. I probably watch her, study her, more often than she realises, and I love the feeling I get from knowing that I know her.

There are three people in the world whom I've observed so intimately that I can pick them out in a crowd silhouetted on the horizon just by the way they stand or move one of their limbs. I know their favourite colours, foods, games, TV programmes and pyjamas. I know how to make them laugh, what frightens them, their friends and their horrible habits. I could say without fear of contradiction that I am one of the world's top two experts on my children.

I know my mother well, too. I know the special code she uses when she telephones to ask, some time in early August, what our plans are for Christmas, and I know that she has her own ideas. I know she won't tell me exactly what they are for fear of imposing, and I know that if I phone my sister, she will be able to tell me what Mum is thinking. I know that Dad always laughs at Tom and Jerry cartoons, and that if he picks up the phone he will want to tell me about the last round of golf he played. I've spent a lifetime relating to these people, living with them, making mistakes and learning about them. When they call me on the phone I don't have to ask or guess who it is because I already know. I know them.

I hope (I don't absolutely know) that God has got a sense of humour, because I am about to compare him to Richard Branson. You see, sometimes it feels to me as if, in my relationship with God, I am like a relatively low-level employee in Virgin Atlantic or on Virgin Trains. Imagining myself as that employee, I've read about Sir Richard; I might

even have met him. I've heard others talk about him; I've spoken to people who have spent more time with him. I could be said to serve him: I live a certain part of my life within a system of which he sits at the head, a system that has certain rules of behaviour, and I even depend on him (or, at least, the managers to whom he delegates) for my daily bread in the form of a monthly salary. His communications team pass me messages from him, his decisions affect me, and somewhere in his Human Resources department is a file that records all the significant events in my career. I might even be one of those lucky employees invited to the annual party at the Branson house and, while there, get to shake his hand or chat with him briefly. Even so, I don't think many of the Virgin team could honestly say that they know Sir Richard Branson.

The act of admitting that I am perhaps only an acquaintance of God feels like a big step, mainly because I seem to meet many, many Christians who tell me that they do know God. I have a suspicion that these people fall into three categories.

I think the largest category is of those who substitute 'know' for 'believe in'. When they ask if you 'know Jesus', they are asking if you believe in Jesus, if you have become a Christian. When they say that they 'know God', they are confessing their belief—but that's not the same as knowing. I believe Richard Branson exists and, if I were his employee, I might even be said to trust him for certain things. However, if I were to speculate about why he persists with that goatee or the quirky personal appearances when he launches a new product, it would be purely that—speculation.

I think the next largest group comprises mainly new Christians who think they know God. I've been there myself and, if I am honest, I envy them that fresh-faced, uncomplicated, exhilarating belief that they have discovered

God and know him. I can remember the breathless realisation that God offers a personal relationship, holding out his hand towards me; and, having seized his hand and experienced my first close encounter with him, I met him properly for the first time. In my excitement I might even have said that I knew him, in the same way that a lucky Virgin employee leaving the Branson drinks party after a 15-second encounter might well tell a mate down the pub that he knew Richard.

I am older and (sadly) more sober now. The more I learn about God, the more I realise I have to learn. But because of that—and here is the point—I really want to know God. I want to know him, to understand him, to get more than a brief glimpse of him, to know him so well that I understand what he is thinking. I want to speak to him and discern that he has a plan. Even if he doesn't want to tell me what it is, I want to be able to gather enough clues to get an idea of what he has in mind. I want to know what he feels, loves, likes, laughs at, hates and enjoys. I want to know what he likes about me and what he gently ignores or tolerates. I want a depth of relationship far greater than that described by those who carelessly toss the word 'know' into an account of their experience of God. I want to become a member of that third category of people, who can say they truly know God.

Just pause with me a moment and think what that would be like. I'm not quite sure I can imagine it, but perhaps you can. Focus on how it would feel to hear God's footstep as he approached and know that it was his; to see an expression of recognition flicker across his face as he met your eyes. Imagine seeing in those eyes an enduring love, a perfect empathy. Imagine being completely understood. Envisage being humoured but not patronised as you make your necessary mistakes, all the while knowing that, having fallen, you will be set back on your feet and dusted down, your skinned knees

kissed better. Imagine having immediate access to perfect advice on all of the most important issues you face, while knowing that the advice will never be forced upon you, but will be held available for the moment when you decide you are ready to ask. Think of knowing with total certainty that you will always be given the rest, food and companionship you need. Imagine understanding that, from time to time, you will be presented with challenges sufficient to help you grow and develop but never beyond your ability, stretching you, but never to breaking point. Imagine knowing God.

Is that what Adam and Eve experienced in the heavenly time before they ate the forbidden fruit? They certainly knew the sound of God's approach, and surely it was the cause of delight rather than fear and embarrassment, as it later became. To be honest, my attempts at picturing those early days in the garden are hampered by the images of manicured fruit trees, lawns and rose bushes. I don't for one minute believe it was anything like that, given the sort of rugged, earthy beauty God seems to prefer in the wild parts of his creation that we have yet to fully possess, but the memories of those Renaissance paintings are hard to shake off.

Of course, there is no contemporary equivalent on earth to this perfect Father-child relationship, but there are fleeting glimpses in our normal healthy experiences. I can recall, as a child, winning a minor race at a family fun day: having broken the tape, I looked up to see my dad's face amid the crowd of parents. There was a look of recognition and approval stretching across the space between us that needed no words. There are times when I ask my own children what they've done at school that day and, instead of the more common shrugged response, they take delight in my interest and in sharing with me some new discovery. These are glimpses of perfection.

Having said that, though, I prefer the somewhat more challenging image of ‘knowing’ conjured up by that friend of God, Abraham.¹ Imagine his level of certainty as he obeyed God’s voice, strapping his only son to a hastily constructed altar and raising a knife above him, ready to sacrifice his sole heir.² This man—this human, real, flesh-and-blood man—had enough confidence in God’s promise that he was prepared to sweep away the only reasonable route through which it could be fulfilled for no other practical reason than as a demonstration of his faith. As Abraham stood there, smelling the sweat and hearing the short gasps of his terrified son, feeling the cool weight of the sacrificial knife in his trembling hands; as he squeezed his eyes shut, clenched his jaw and tensed ready for the blow; as time and the world paused, was he unshaken in his knowledge of his loving friend, Yahweh?

Surely Abraham must have had doubts. Did he wrestle with the idea that this inner voice, telling him to do terrible, inconceivable things, was a symptom of madness seizing him? Even if he didn’t question God, surely he must have questioned his own mental health. Of course he would have stood there, waiting for God to intervene. Did he know God so well that he expected a stay of execution, recognising that the act demanded of him was not in keeping with God’s true personality? It may seem strange that I prefer this moment of turmoil to many of the gentler Bible stories of lost sheep found and wounds healed, but it speaks to me of real knowing. No matter what Abraham expected, no matter how hard he wrestled internally, his actions can only have been those of a man who absolutely knew his God and his God’s voice.

You might be thinking that if that is what it takes to really

¹ See Isaiah 41:8

² Genesis 22:2–10

know God, then ignorance is bliss. I don't see myself as a budding Abraham and I don't even pretend to know exactly what was going on in the drama described in Genesis, but to hear God so clearly and with such a degree of certainty—now that would be something. To know God and to trust that, whatever happened, it would be for the best (or, unlike Jonah, to know fully that any attempt to thwart God's plans would be futile) speaks of real intimacy and understanding.

The Bible is full of the rewards of such knowledge. If I knew God this well, would I see modern-day equivalents of walls tumbling, promised lands opening up, prison doors flung open and visions of heaven so wonderful that they can be expressed only in mythical metaphor? Perhaps not, but I'd settle for a certain knowledge that, far beyond our dreary trudge through a poisoned world in which money does the only talking to which people pay attention, I could see the grand plan and the fulfilment of God's promises of peace and beauty and power and holy passion. I'd be happy with enough vision to see the spiritual impact of my prayers, to know that he rejoices when I do the right thing, and to know which way to look when I am uncertain or tempted.

I don't believe that I can fully know God, but I do so want to know him better.

Wanting to want

If you don't get what you want, it's a sign that either you did not seriously want it, or that you tried to bargain over the price.

Rudyard Kipling

Normally this is the point in the chapter at which the author presents you, the reader, with some practical advice: study

your Bible more, read some commentaries, find a place and a time for quiet reflection, buy some daily notes, get into a prayer triplet, go on a retreat, do some fasting, reflect.

And so you should. These disciplines are important—vital, even—to our development in understanding God and our own faith. I have been doing these things for years; indeed, I am still doing them. I work assiduously at my prayer life, blocking out time each morning to pray about the day ahead and my relationship with God. I use the tactic, recommended by Billy Graham, of reading a psalm every day to deepen my relationship with God. I use a devotional guide (an online one, this being the 21st century) to guide me into different parts of the Bible, to discover new insights of my own or those of the authors. I have written a Life Purpose Statement and I read a sentence from it every day, as well as setting aside half a day every six weeks to review it and look for evidence of that purpose in my life and my time commitments. Speaking of that, I set aside half an hour every Friday morning to check that the following week's appointments include sufficient activities that correspond to the priorities I want to have in my life. I read commentaries and guidance written by authors such as Philip Yancey and John Eldredge and James Lawrence and Henri Nouwen. I keep a daily prayer diary, and my Bible is littered with notes and references and insights.

If there is one area where I am especially weak, it is in praying with others, but I'm even working on that. I've recently found a friend I respect and with whom I believe I can be open and vulnerable, who has agreed to work with me so that we can be mutually accountable and support each other on our spiritual journeys. (If you are reading this, thanks, Jon!)

Is all this working? Yes.

As I have invested heavily in time and effort, getting to

know God, I have grown in my understanding. I'm still very much a work in progress but I can look back with great affection on times when the effort has been rewarded. There was a period of six weeks when I found myself living alone in the Nepali border town of Nepalgunj. I would get up each day, make a cup of coffee and sit on my flat roof to watch the sun creep over the horizon. I'd start by just watching the sky brighten to a pale blue over the grubby houses, trying to concentrate on getting a sense of the presence of God.³ My mind would wander from time to time, or I'd be distracted by my neighbour spreading runner beans or peas out on her roof to dry, by the mangy street dogs scavenging in the piles of litter or by the jostle of children kicking up the dust on the way to school. But I would try not to let these disturbances bother me and instead would look for the handiwork of the Creator in even the most mundane. Then, after a while, I'd turn to my Bible, read a few verses and run through the expected events of the coming day in my mind, parading them in front of God and asking for his blessing or his advice.

I don't believe that at any time I heard a direct literal answer or instruction but, when I climbed down the steps before heading out to work, I was able to carry a sense of the spiritual with me into my day. Too often, of course, it evaporated in the heat and hurry, on some days more quickly than on others, but I knew it would be restored, perhaps a fraction more durably, on the next morning.

Up until that time I'd failed to get a consistent quiet time routine going, even though I knew I should. I'd tried various Bible notes, various times of day and various locations, all

³ I heartily recommend a book by John White called *The Fight: A Practical Handbook for Christian Living* (IVP, 2008, first published 1976) for practical advice on how to go about focusing on God.

without success for longer than perhaps a couple of weeks. Pretty quickly I'd get fed up. Until then, I knew I should be investing in knowing God better but I did not seem able to put in the effort. It wasn't so much that I wanted to know God better; it was that I wanted to want to know him.

However, after a while I began to find that if, for some reason, I did miss my daily dose of devotions, I didn't feel guilty but I did feel the loss. I had come to rely on the peace, the inner sense of calm and purpose that seemed to grow during the quiet times, and days that started without it were just not as good. I became addicted to it. I found I was embracing anything that could give me a deeper insight into God and my relationship with him.

People often say that the secret to developing a healthy relationship—whether as a husband, wife, parent, child or good friend—is to spend quality time together. However, just try calling up someone you haven't spoken to for years and inviting them over for some 'quality time'. Chances are, it won't be straightforward. Even now I can 'hear' the embarrassing silence as the small talk is exhausted and, in the absence of shared experience, there is nothing more to say. In the same way that a vibrant prayer life rarely springs into being on the first day you commit to morning devotions, and in the same way that an absent father can't immediately and easily engage with his children, so quality time comes only as a result of quantity time. The walk to school, kicking a ball in the park, even watching TV together, all work to get fathers relating to their sons and daughters.

If you are hoping to find in the following pages a quick-fix solution, a short cut to heavenly insight, then I am delighted to disappoint you. This book would be far more radical and controversial if I were to suggest that the Quiet Time is dead, that Bible study is outdated and that there is another way,

but it turns out that those wiser, more mature, more learned Christians than I, who have been recommending those disciplines for years, are in fact right. Sorry.

Head and heart

I believe in God. If you were me, and had my life, you would believe in God too.

Michael Caine, *Sunday Times*, 23 December 2001

My problem is that I am what they call an activist: I learn best not by thinking about things but by experiencing them. This infuriates my wife frequently. If she tells me that a plate is hot, I still have to touch it to check for myself. Contrary to the way it must seem, it's not that I don't believe her; it's just that I seem to need to feel the heat and sometimes get burnt for myself before I fully grasp the truth. I can read the Bible from cover to cover (indeed, I have done) and I can find written there the characteristics of God. I can read that he is slow to anger, abounding in love, powerful, forgiving, worthy of praise, and that he delights in me, and I am encouraged. While I can hold that information in my mind, at the front of my consciousness, it affects how I feel and how I behave, but as soon as I return to autopilot my unconscious worldview takes over.

I have read a thousand times that God will provide for me, that I am more valuable than so many sparrows and lilies, but when I look at my diminishing bank account and insecure income I worry about paying the mortgage. On my good days, I can see the red numbers on the bank statement, hand them over to God and go about my work with nothing more than a mildly nagging sense of concern. On my bad days,

the problem looms large, casting a shadow over everything else, destroying my concentration, feeding my irritation and robbing me of peace. Oh, me of little faith! The promises haven't changed but I don't think I have really taken them right down into my heart. They just tend to float around in my head.

It occurred to me that God would know this, having designed me. If I am wired this way, and if God really does want me to grow in more than a purely theoretical understanding of him, then he will have to give me practical examples of how this relationship works—examples that I can experience and feel and respond to. I need experiences in which I can get burnt, in which I can taste small triumphs and struggle with failures. If I am to learn more about how God deals with me and gain insights into the way his mind and heart work, I am probably going to need some practical examples to go with all the theoretical data I am stuffing into my head. And, if God really does know me, surely he is going to provide the opportunities, if I can just find them.

Just pause and look back at the paragraph that starts 'Focus on how it would feel' on page 14. Read again what it would be like to know God that well. As I use my imagination, it begins to sound more and more like having a relationship with a perfect father. That, of itself, is perhaps not an especially startling insight. Hold the front page: God is like a heavenly father! I do get another response, though. As I think through the words, I begin to realise that, as well as describing God, I am describing the impossibly perfect father I would so love to be to my own children. With that thought comes a flash of insight, along with a jumbled rush of understanding that God and I have something in common: we both want to be perfect fathers. Though unattainable, the *desire* to be a perfect father is something I can relate to.

I want to be the father who is always there, who always provides, who supports his children through their mistakes, helping them to grow. I know, innately, that to be that sort of father I need to discipline and teach them, sometimes leave them to make their own discoveries, and frequently deny them things that they want. I want my children to develop and I know that they should behave with respect.

My fallen humanity prevents me from being perfect, of course, but my desire to be a perfect father does provide me with a framework within which to relate to God. On a daily basis, God is perfectly doing all those fatherly things: choosing not to answer my inappropriate prayers, recognising my genuine achievements with appropriate rewards, listening to my questions but trying to let me work out my own answers, or giving answers when required. It also occurs to me that I often understand about as much of all this as my two-year-old son does when his mother correctly refuses to let him use the kitchen scissors. Neither he nor I is above responding with an irrational tantrum.

As I think about this further, I begin to see better in myself the imperfect child.

Little mirrors

A humble knowledge of thyself is a surer way to God than the deepest search after science.

Thomas à Kempis

‘Mister Stupid.’ That was my two-year-old son calling me names again, and to be honest I didn’t know how best to respond. Of course, the language was inappropriate, but the attitude wasn’t. Jed has been going through a phase of giving

everyone the epithet ‘Mister’ and, because Jed is our third, I’ve grown used to the concept of passing phases—where, for a day or a week or even a month, a particular word becomes fashionable. These little stages are normally charming mileposts, and I’ve lost count of them. Many of them are endearing. Some stick in the mind, like Joshua calling his uncle Michael ‘Uncle Mo-mo’. I remember it partly because Mike is pretty short, and it seemed somehow appropriate.

There is nothing especially remarkable, then, about going through the day hearing Jed speak to Mister Daddy, Mister Mummy, Mister Doogie (the dog), Mister Sid (teddy), Mister Zoë (his sister), Mister Trampoline and, inexplicably, Mister Smiksty (before you ask, I haven’t a clue). And so it goes on: you get the idea.

‘Stupid’, though—now that is another matter. That word is a taboo in our household, a prohibited word. At least, it’s prohibited except when I use it. That sounds like a double standard, doesn’t it? Well, it isn’t, because I am allowed to call myself stupid (for forgetting my car keys), and I am permitted to call a badly designed product ‘stupid’ (when I turn on my TV, a small green LED comes on, presumably because the fact that it is showing me a TV programme is not enough evidence). I am especially allowed to call companies ‘stupid’ (because they don’t understand that I prefer speaking to real people: if they did, they would give me the option to ‘press 5 if you never again want to listen to a list of options none of which quite fits your particular circumstances’). Those are the only circumstances in which the word is permitted.

So I should be angry that Jed has called me stupid. Or should I? I know he doesn’t actually think I am stupid. This is the same little boy who is sometimes so excited when I come home that he jumps up and down on the spot and laughs because he doesn’t have the words to explain his delight

(although on other occasions he completely ignores me because Iggle Piggle is on the TV, and Iggle Piggle outranks me by some distance). He also knows that I am the person to come to for really important stuff, like fixing plastic toys, finding new batteries, putting on shoes and unwrapping sweets.

More significant than that, though, is his tone. He thinks he is being funny. There's nothing aggressive or resentful about his manner, and his smile is a cheeky grin pasted on a face of expectation. It's not a face ready to flinch because he knows he has done something deserving of punishment or reproof, and he's not challenging me. He's wanting me to play, to join in, to laugh with him.

Within me, however, I feel the rising response. The word he has used is disrespectful and he must be taught to respect me. His words are rude and he must be taught to be polite. He has insulted me. Actually, the way I feel, it is not so much that he has insulted me personally but more that he has insulted my parenting. Surely, if I was raising him correctly, if I was teaching and disciplining him in the right way, he should be standing before me as a perfect shining example of good manners. He has, in fact, touched the place deep within me that lies unmentioned, that small itchy spot that irritates me, my lingering fear that I am not doing this parenting thing right, that in the area of most importance I am failing.

How do you respond to being called a failure? Are you one of those Olympic-standard athletes in the personality game, who just humbly knuckles down and tries harder? I'm afraid I am more of the wounded tiger type, who instinctively wants to lash out, to deny the charge—except when I am tired, that is, when I just want to shove the issue under the carpet and deal with it another day. So I am embarrassed to admit that sometimes when Jed calls me names, I scold him—initially not with a raised voice, but if my response does not elicit

a visible display of remorse I am prepared to turn up the volume.

How did my child learn to call people names? Actually, he got it from me. I call people names all the time, especially in my family. I don't suppose an hour goes by without me calling one of the children 'muscles' or 'sausage' or 'pickle' or 'monster' or 'chunky monkey' or 'superstar' or 'princess' or 'sunshine' or something. I don't call people 'stupid', of course, at least not within earshot of my children. The point is that I (mostly) use names appropriately as terms of endearment, and Jed has worked out that this name-calling business is OK. He doesn't think I am actually stupid any more than I think he is really a sausage, and he has got some learning to do. In the meantime, it seems he is just reflecting a slightly distorted version of my own behaviour back at me. He is an imperfect reflection.

If I am on the ball enough to work all this out in the seconds when the interaction takes place, I am able to suppress my barked response and instead see his behaviour for what it is. I can respond to his delight in seeing me and his affection, and then take the time to explain why 'we don't call people "stupid"'.

I'd like to tell you that I handled the moment this wonderfully when it actually happened. I didn't. Some time later, however, when my wife had pointed out the insights that I am writing down here as my own, I began to think about that idea of the imperfect reflection. If my son throws back an imperfect reflection of me as I muddle through as a 'good enough' father (I hope), might I be throwing back an imperfect reflection of God? If I were able to stand back and look at how I behave as a father—or rather, how I feel I should behave—might that not give me a better understanding of what God is playing at in the way he relates to me? As a byproduct, a

careful examination of my own children might give me some additional and perhaps lightly chastening insights into how well I handle his fathering. Just as my wife is keen to read parenting books and pass on the received wisdom, I have to be careful to check my imperfect experiences against 'The Manual', but it might be interesting.

I hope you'll join me, and I promise not to call you 'stupid'!