Mostly You Can Hold Me and Rock Me: Writing, Humility, and Healing

I have an introduction to this sermon.

First, you’ll hear of Isaiah and Stephen. Stephen and I are Isaiah’s adoptive parents. When children are available for adoption, we often talk about finding them “a forever family”. Despite the fact that Stephen and I are divorced, we’re still Isaiah’s “forever family”. I am honored that Stephen, my steadfast co-parent, is here today. Once, when I was preparing to share something for an audience and couldn’t get through it without crying, Stephen said, “Remember, you are giving a gift to the audience.” I do remember. Thank you. And hopefully it will propel me through this homily without crying.

Second, I am grateful to Ann Webster for asking me to do this. It helps to have someone believe in you when you’re doing something really hard. When Ann asked me, over a year had passed since I had read any of what I had written. I had taken a detour to complete UVM’s Yoga Teacher Training. That’s a different story. When I agreed to speak about writing, I had two fears: first, that the seven chapters I had already written were really bad. Not so—only one of them is really bad. My second fear was of re-entering the difficult emotions of the writing. Yup, it has been scary all over again. But more strongly is my commitment to continue writing my story and to share it, so for this, I am grateful to Ann for nudging me.

Third, it is true I am writing a book. But I am in the beginning stages. I have no neat package of wisdom to share with you. I don’t have the perspective of being done and looking back, describing a tidy journey of getting from my initial brilliant idea to the brilliant best-selling book.

Fourth and last, I wrote an abstract for the book. It is 86 words long; it took me five minutes and was really easy to write. To provide a bit of orientation, here it is.

The purpose of this book is to illuminate the issue of developmental trauma and provide resources and inspiration for multiple pathways to wholeness and healing for children and adults. I chronicle my personal experience parenting a child with developmental trauma and the resulting secondary trauma. A parallel narrative relays my professional experience as the principal of a rural elementary school. I strive to create with my colleagues a trauma-responsive school, an educational setting where children and their families can heal from developmental trauma and rediscover joy.
This abstract makes it seem simple and straightforward. But it’s hard to know where to start the telling of a story that isn’t over.

I could start with the Thursday night in December 2002 when I met 2 ½ year-old Isaiah. And how he moved in as a foster child on that Saturday morning, the Winter Solstice. How we waited to cut down our Christmas tree until he arrived. And, that we adopted him just before he turned 4. And that next week he is turning 18. I could tell you that just the other day, 6-foot tall, bearded Isaiah called out the window to me: Mom? Yup, I answered. “Mommy, I love you.” “I love you, too, sweetie”. How he still calls me Mommy sometimes. And tells me spontaneously, that he loves me. I could tell you what a lucky mom I am.

Or I could start with what developmental trauma is. Developmental trauma disorder is characterized by complex trauma—trauma that is repeated, cumulative, and often increases. It differs from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder in a few key ways (though the two may overlap in some individuals). First, developmental trauma occurs while the brain is in its most intense period of development, before the age of five. It changes how the brain develops. Second, the trauma is perpetrated often by an adult responsible for nurturing and protecting the child which leads commonly to deep-seated issues of trust. Trauma can be emotional, physical or sexual abuse directed at the child or witnessed by the child. Trauma can also be neglect. Neglect of basic needs—feeding, providing adequate sleep; caring for the child’s toileting. It can also include neglecting to hold and rock a baby; or neglecting to coo and smile and giggle and bounce. Or not talking, singing, or reading to a child.

I could start by sharing that I’ve spent the last 15 years living and learning about the devastating and unimaginable effects of developmental trauma on my child, on our family, and on countless others.

But since this is the first in a series of summer services about the arts, I will start with how I came to write the story of raising Isaiah and why I know it matters. And how the writing of the story and the living of it are inextricably linked.

I’ve considered myself a writer since I was a kid. I’ve always loved language; the sounds of words together; how changing the order of two words shifts meaning; how using a word that is slightly off center causes the reader to wonder or laugh. When I need to relax or have a good laugh before I turn out the light, I turn to one of two books, *Eats, Shoots, and Leaves: the Zero Tolerance Approach to Punctuation* or *Between You and Me: Confessions of a Comma Queen.*
I love how words, carefully crafted, connect us to one another, nudge us to see what we share, to melt our boundaries a bit. How they encourage us to explore, to reach.

As part of my explorations as a young adult, I hitchhiked around the perimeter of Ireland and Northern Ireland. Upon returning, to make some money for my next overseas adventure, I wrote a travel article about my experience. The Boston Globe published it, paid me, and I bought a plane ticket to Beijing where I went to teach English at a university. ((You are right, it wasn’t quite that simple, but that’s the gist). Since then, 3 decades ago, aside from writing for work and to family and friends, I haven’t felt I had anything compelling to say—nothing that hadn’t been written by someone else. I am an introvert, not inclined to share myself publicly or widely or casually, so I felt no compulsion to write for publication.

So when Isaiah moved in on that December day, writing was not part of my life. Isaiah arrived with a lot of stuff—the usual—clothes, bibs, diapers, miniature plates and cups adapted with 2 handles for small, still-learning hands. Plastic rescue and construction vehicles; an orange, bear, his favorite. At his first foster family’s house, Isaiah and the orange bear went to the mailbox together every day and collected the contents. That stuff was all the usual toddler stuff. Then there was the different stuff: Isaiah had attended the Parent Child Center for a couple of years, on and off, as his birth parents connected with and broke from the center. Bless the Parent Child Center staff, as they wrote in a daily journal that went back and forth from them to home, or whatever version of home baby and toddler Isaiah was experiencing. For the first year or so, everyone described a buoyant, joyful baby who loved to eat and had a great sense of humor. Then, as the birth family unraveled and Isaiah no longer had a steady home, the writers—caregivers, his birth mom, relatives, neighbors, and finally his first foster mom—reported more and more distress—fussiness, fear of taking normal risks, clinginess, intolerance of peers, restless sleeps, and an interruption in potty training. These are all common results of developmental trauma.

So Isaiah came with the usual stuff and something a bit different—those daily journals. He also came with something that no child should need to have—a file from the Department of Children and Families (SRS at the time). This file included a history of each of his birth parents—their childhoods—both heartbreaking; a report on Isaiah’s birth—normal. His medical history. Then the record of his birth father’s first car accident that landed him in ICU and then recovery in the hospital for months. Then the second car accident a year later, this time with Isaiah in the car. And in between, a blank including five months, noting only that Isaiah’s birth mother had taken Isaiah to Tennessee and lived in an abandoned building. Then, a return to Vermont punctuated
by moving from friend to family member, then finally to the John Graham Shelter in Vergennes, at which point Isaiah was taken into state custody and placed in a kinship foster family for three months before coming to us.

While no child should have to have these files, I am grateful for Isaiah’s because 14 years later, when I realized I had a story to tell and readied myself for writing a book, I had raw material nearly from his birth. In addition, I had kept journals. When Isaiah had been with us almost a year, I ran into a fellow Lincolnite outside of the Lincoln General Store. He was holding a couple of journals and he told me that he or his wife had written in each of the journals for their two sons every day since their births. That’s when I started journaling daily about raising Isaiah.

One of my early journal entries names the books I read with Isaiah that day—Tacky the Penguin and Sheep in a Shop. And that we finished the last of the Thanksgiving turkey. The entry ends with, “You are the indisputable joy of our lives. Papa and I are elated to be your parents and guides.”

Most entries reference our connection to the land and seasons...here’s another one from shortly before Isaiah’s adoption.

“When we got home from preschool, we sat across the road from our barn in a little notch mowed by Claude. Dandelions lit up the lush, green grass, the mountains and the sky blue hues; the barn sporting its first coat of red in many decades. I said, “You’re a lucky boy; I’m a lucky Mama. Do you know why I think so?”
“‘We have a family,’” you answered.

Many early entries are like this—recounting conversations, food, books, quiet adventures, and utter love and awe for Isaiah. The first chapter of the book is entitled, Before We Knew. This was the period of time that we felt like we dodged a bullet—or a firing squad in terms of the effects of his trauma. True, Isaiah took hours to fall asleep. He needed to be held often and for long periods of time. He would approach Stephen or me with upstretched arms and say, “Up you.” And we would hold him, hug him, wrestle, tickle, rock, read. Despite his challenges and my persistent surprise at having become an instant parent, he seemed “OK”. At the time, I had not heard of developmental trauma and had little idea that what he had experienced would affect him—and our entire family—profoundly and forever.

Most challenging was Isaiah’s avoidance of potty training. His pediatrician assured us that his habits were normal. We accepted that he was bound to develop some skills a bit later given his neglect.
About a year after Isaiah came to us, I wrote this seemingly innocent journal entry:

“You and I were home together this morning. We played hide and seek. You had a smelly diaper so I told you that as soon as you had a clean one (with my help) we’d play more. Well, instead of being subjected to a clean diaper (!) you played mostly on your own for the next couple of hours.”

What we didn’t know at the time was that Isaiah was coping with his trauma in an alarming way.

At age five, when Isaiah was still not toilet-trained for bowel movements, he was diagnosed with encopresis. Encopresis is a repeated passage of feces where it doesn’t belong (clothing, the floor). It is most often involuntary, but can be intentional. Encopresis is a debilitating condition to deal with as a parent, as it usually occurs at a stage when children are past the age of toilet training. When Isaiah was diagnosed, he was soiling multiple times on most days. An x-ray revealed segments of his colon filled with impacted fecal matter. For us, the persistent soiling controlled our lives, disrupting or making nearly impossible ordinary and special activities. Outwardly, I continued leading a vibrant and successful school and tended my garden. Inside, I was crumbling. My world became small as I disconnected from friends and family. Our marriage, which came with challenges quite independent of Isaiah, became more tenuous. We learned that recovering from encopresis usually takes as long as it took for the child to develop the condition. I’m glad that we didn’t know at the time that we had not 2 or 3 years of recovery ahead of us, but nearly 9. After multiple approaches, therapies, and visits to medical specialists, Isaiah learned to successfully and consistently use the toilet shortly before he turned 14.

For the two years after his encopresis resolved, I felt like I could breathe again. I could stretch, reach out, and begin to rebuild a world larger than toileting and parenting and work. I conceived of writing a picture book about Isaiah’s and my journey together. On one page would be my telling of a story. On the facing page would be his perception and version. Sidebars would explain aspects of developmental trauma and brain development. I thought this was a brilliant idea, but Isaiah, my imagined writing partner, wanted nothing to do with it.

At the same time, I was ready for a professional and personal jumpstart in my life, so I decided to return to school and work towards a second master’s degree. It wasn’t so much the degree that attracted me, but that the Interdisciplinary Studies in Education Program at UVM would allow me to write with some structure and a lot of flexibility.
I enrolled in a writing course called Scholarly Personal Narrative. On the first day of class, I introduced myself by saying, “This is my first course in the Master’s Program and I am here to write a book about raising my son, Isaiah, who has developmental trauma. I explained what developmental trauma is, which I do at any opportunity. I said he’s 16, a wonderful and hard kid who I love like crazy. As an afterthought, I mentioned that I was I an elementary school principal.

I realized, in that moment, that my focus had shifted from defining myself primarily as an educator, to identifying first as a parent and a writer. I had said aloud, in front of 2 dozen people I didn’t know, that I was here to write a book. No one looked askance or balked or showed any sign that this would not come to pass. And somehow that encouraged me, (gave me courage) the quiet, attentive acceptance of 24 strangers.

The course imposed the discipline I needed to write. As my professor, Robert Nash often said, “Butt to chair”. But where to start—I had no idea. All I could think of at first was the toileting part. How all-consuming that was and how it was the one thing I felt least comfortable writing about because of the private nature of it. And yet the story without it would be disingenuous.

Butt to chair, I just had to start. I have a writing desk in my bedroom. It was my mom’s, and before that, my great aunt’s for whom I was named. It faces west, toward the woods, toward the closing day. It’s wooden with leather panels on top, peeling at a couple of corners. Brass ring handles on the drawers.

It took weeks, on and off, to gather and organize everything I had about Isaiah. I moved additional furniture into the room around my desk to house everything—the DCF file, the photo albums which told of our adventures close to home and far; Isaiah’s art work, the memorabilia—tickets to Circus Smirkus; short notes from Isaiah: “I love you, Mama”. And, “I am sorry for pooping.” Scraps of paper with quotes of Isaiah’s words to me. Here’s the one that says, “Mostly I want you to hold me and rock me,” which he said in response to my question one day, “WHAT do you want me to do?” when I was at the end of my parenting rope. And the journals I had kept. Much of the material was painful to read. Even at this point, there’s much I have only skimmed and much I haven’t reread at all. There came a time while journaling that I just couldn’t write about all the despair and desperation. But there wasn’t much else. So I stopped journaling for years.
With my desk and resources ready, I approached the first long assignment for the class. 3000 words. That comes out to about six pages single-spaced. It is a reasonable length for a book chapter.

Where to start became a small matter in the face of just starting. The two years leading up to that moment had been relatively sane. Sometimes I even doubted that the previous decade had been as debilitating as I had remembered. Other times I thought, “Why rehash it—it is over. What’s the use?” And still other times I felt like I couldn’t possibly write the story I was continuing to live. There was no sweet ending, no assurance of—well, anything. And excruciating experiences continued to happen. I wanted to avoid those, not write about them.

Conveniently, my bed is next to my writing desk. So even before getting to the chair, let alone the first 100 of 3000 words, I just lay down and just cried. Heaving sobs. And this became what I allowed myself—crying it out. Then I put my butt in the chair and wrote. When I wrote the final reflection for the second UVM writing course I took, I came to understand the depth of my tears. I wrote, in part, “Becoming a parent is a leap of vulnerability, humility, and immeasurable potential for fear, joy, and loss. I might say fulfillment, but fulfillment in parenting, truly, is being able to let go and allow that person who you can’t imagine living without, live their own life. Maybe without you. And maybe dying.”

Here’s the part about humility. I need to be explicit about this, because it is easy to avoid.

There are two parts to experiencing humility through this journey of parenting and writing. The first part is just painful. In the book, Inside I’m Hurting, about strategies schools can use with children like Isaiah, there’s a page that says this: The child may…

- leave you feeling deskilled and worthless because of his own feelings about himself;
- push you to your emotional limits;
- get into your thinking so you don’t forget him;
- find your vulnerabilities;
- attempt to get you to behave “out of character”, for example to scream or yell at him;
- Leave you feeling like you have gone slightly mad!

This is how I felt for a good portion of a decade. It was humbling.
Part two of humility is sharing these wretched experiences, which really don’t make me look that great. Here are a couple of excerpts from the draft of my book.

    The winter Isaiah arrived, Stephen and I were attending a weekly evening class offered to people contemplating becoming foster and/or adoptive parents. I disliked driving 30 minutes for the class after dark in the cold to talk with people. I was tired; we had trouble finding childcare. And the content was disturbing. Becoming a parent of a neglected child began to seem like a really bad idea for me. It seemed that I wasn’t really that open to the experience or a particularly warm, giving person. I had made a big mistake.

    In one class exercise, we were asked to write down the 10 most important aspects of our lives. We were asked to cross them off one at a time until we were left with the one that would be most devastating to lose. We did the exercise for ourselves and to illustrate how much foster children had already lost—most significantly, their parents.

    As I crossed off people and things, I shielded my list from my husband. I have come to recognize that, in times of stress and feeling overwhelmed, I entertain jettisoning anything and anyone from my life so that there’s just less and I can regain balance and sanity. I hid my list because the remaining name was not Stephen’s. Nor was it Isaiah’s. It was Bean Bean, our black cat. I recognized this as desperate. And honest. I scared myself.

    I kept this to myself, ashamed, for 12 and a half years. Then I wrote that. Then I shared it with my professor. I can’t stress how essential it is to have an entirely trusted reader of one’s writing. There was one more step. Here’s another excerpt.

12.5 Years Later (after the Choosing of Bean Bean, the Cat)

    Isaiah sits in a captain’s chair in the kitchen while I putter, anxious for him to go watch an episode of Star Trek so I can edit this writing. We’ve already chatted for 20 minutes. Hard, honest progress on old, tough issues. Quiet tones. Nodding. Contemplative. We’re doing well in these minutes, being human together.

    “OK, get going, sweetie”.

    “I’m biding my time. I don’t know why…I just like talking to you”.

    He doesn’t budge.

    My 16-year old has just told me that he likes talking with me. Aside from not wanting to be another parent who has ditched him—I could have died right there a happy woman.

    An ecstatic woman. I push on him. I am relentless. Too much sometimes. But at the end of the day, he wants to talk with me.

    “Can I tell you a story? I ask.
“Sure”.
I tell him about having to go to foster/adoptive parenting class.
“That’s stupid.” (He is 16, after all).
I tell him about the 10 most important things and people exercise. I am wracked with guilt for the past and for the fact that I am about to reveal to my still-fragile child that I didn’t really want him back then. It’s selfish. I should stop. But I want it outside of myself.

“Guess what was left by the end?”
Pause.
“It wasn’t you.”
“Oh, I was going to say ’moi’.”
“It wasn’t Papa, either. Someone who lived here.”
“Gannie?”
“Nope”. “This is kind of embarrassing…Bean Bean”, I say.
He gives a little laugh. Eyes to mine.
“That’s not embarrassing”, he says.
He smiles at me.

In that moment, I was forgiven for something that Isaiah, anyway, didn’t even think needed forgiveness. Just acceptance. For the record, now I pick Isaiah as the most precious anything or anyone in my life. Even though I have a great new husband and two awesome cats.

The “healing” part of the title of this homily is unresolved. I’m pretty fragile and broken still. Here’s what comprises my days and nights: raw fear; stretches of sparse communication with Isaiah as he spreads his boy-man wings; moments of relief; precious conversations; loads of humility; still missteps. I have tools for healing: meditation, yoga, exercise, sleep, healthy food, time with family and friends. But honestly, there are plenty of times I do none of these. I lean, with humility, on the generous forgiveness and acceptance from those around me, including Isaiah. And when my disgust for my own being has become intolerable, I trust that grace will strike me. And then, ahhh…relief. Everything is transformed.

Benediction
I think what we’re all seeking, in some way, is to be able to share our dark parts and still be loved. To be a bit more whole. For now, I’ve come to think of healing as a combination of grace and forgiveness. Whether you are a person with developmental trauma, you have a person with trauma in your life, or not, I hope for all of us both forgiveness and grace. Thank you.