

Praise for *The Never-Ending JOYS of Parenting*

I was honored to have the opportunity to read *The Never-Ending Joys of Parenting: Adopting and Fostering Kids* prior to its publication. This charming book about parenting is primarily from the perspective of the dad. This dad, Jim, and his wife, June, fostered children and adopted several. Today they are grandparents, with the “right” of spoiling the darlings, then sending them home to their parents. Over the years, Jim learned as much as he could about parenting, adoption, fostering, fetal alcohol syndrome and fetal alcohol spectrum disorder, and he has included an entire chapter about FAS in his book. He is a speaker on these subjects at high schools in his community. Jim weaves this material through his delightful book, and it is amazingly pertinent to life in our culture today. Read! Enjoy! Be informed!

—Gayle Gustafson, freelance writer and editor

I enjoyed reading Jim McConnell’s book and could relate to a number of the topics he covers. I was adopted as an infant into a home where alcohol was never used. Yet by the age of thirteen, I became an alcoholic and struggled with it for twenty years until I was finally able to quit. I always wondered why. After reading this book, I now have a much better understanding of the causes and prevention of alcoholism.

—Pastor Darryl Elledge

The Never-Ending Joys of Parenting was a quick and informative read. I thought it might not apply to me, having never adopted, but—let’s face it—parenting is parenting! We all share the joys and trials. This book is insightful and honest and doesn’t sugarcoat the dark moments, but always celebrates the good times. I love the way the author gives so much credit to his wife, June, who is the glue that holds the whole glorious mess together. This is a family I would like to get to know better!

—Jeanna Rard, business owner

In Jim’s book, *The Never-Ending Joys of Parenting*, the love Jim and June have for their children is amazing. Most of their children had medical, emotional, or mental problems. The couple loved them even more. They set house rules so the kids knew what was expected of them. They did everything they could for the children in their care. Many trips to the doctors’ offices or hospitals were taken. They were involved in the children’s education and physical, emotional, and mental needs. This is a great book about families.

—Judi Mayfield

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Preface

This book is dedicated to all new and wannabe parents—whether your children are your biological offspring or are adopted, foster, or still in your imagination.

I hope you will find our family's story helpful, insightful, enlightening, and entertaining. As new parents, we had grand ideas of becoming the best father and mother we could be. After all, we had read parenting books and taken classes before becoming parents, so naturally, we knew how it should be done. Additionally, I was once a child with my own intelligent and caring parents and had experience observing an excellent father and mother in action.

Sadly, we discovered throughout our journey that we were mere humans and inclined toward making mistakes. As you read our story, I will share a few of our successes and our mistakes and what we learned along the way. Perhaps I can help you avoid pitfalls from the philosophy my daughter frequently declared during her late teens and twenties: "Dad, I've just got to learn things the hard way."

Throughout each chapter, I attempt to share insights from our journey; some are more obvious and some more subtle. My wish is that you might find intermittent gems along the way to help you in parenting your children.

The stories I am going to share are true. I have, however, changed many of the names to protect our dear ones and others we've encountered. I've used my real name and my wife's name because we are the guilty parties—guilty of imperfection, mistakes, and occasionally making parenting decisions while exhausted, despite our best intentions. Confession is good for the soul, I've heard.

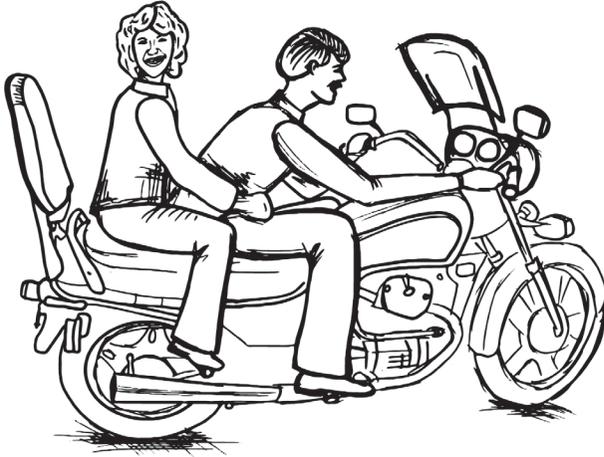
This book contains actual events written from my perspective. If you were to ask my children their interpretation of many of these events, it would not surprise me at all to find that they may have a different point of view from mine.

I would like to thank my wife, June, for the decades she has endured, going through our adventure together, and spending dozens of joy-filled hours reminding me of hundreds of family escapades while I put our story onto paper. During our reminiscing, we shared many laughs and a few tears.

June and I are indebted to the many caseworkers, teachers, and counselors who helped our children and us over the years. We are grateful to Antonia Rathbun for her instruction in fetal alcohol syndrome and guidance in helping us with the needs of a number of our children. My gratitude also goes to Jon Drury and other members of the Vancouver Writers group who gave me encouragement and feedback while writing. Additionally, I appreciate the editing help I received from Ron Ulrich, Darryl Elledge, Judi Mayfield, Jeanna Rard, Amber Thielbar, Chris Bettez, Gayle Gustafson, and Karen Engle.

Please sit back and enjoy our parenting adventure.

Chapter 1



Love at First Sight—Well, Not Exactly

Even as a young child, I wondered what it would be like to be a dad.

I enjoyed watching people—their faces, gestures, and interactions. Weird, I know. From paying attention to my parents, neighbors, and relatives during my teen years, I concluded that four significant decisions would determine the course of my life. These were my career choice, the person I married, how many kids we would have and how we would raise them, as well as the moral and spiritual decisions I made.

On a sunny day in May 1969, during the last month of my

senior year, our physics teacher started class differently than he'd done every other day of the school year. Instead of standing behind his podium, he had my full attention as he sat on his desk and spoke with us about our futures. One of his declarations jumped out and grabbed me: "Anyone earning an A in this class owes it to your country to study physics in college." Perfect! I had received direction for my career from an adult I trusted.

I had plans to attend a university in my hometown of Spokane, Washington, but my dad had a different idea. He told me that I could go to college anywhere I wanted, but if I attended Northwest Nazarene University (NNU) in Nampa, Idaho, he would help with the tuition. I later learned that he thought it would be good to push me out of the nest so I would develop more independence—four hundred miles away from home.

During my first year at NNU, I declared my major to be engineering physics. One of my physics professors, Dr. Gilbert Ford, the department chair, had worked on the Manhattan Project with one of my heroes, Albert Einstein. During ninth grade algebra, my friends called me Einstein because I easily understood the subject and could tutor them when they needed help.

Naturally, I was impressed with Dr. Ford. He was a challenging instructor, who often spoke above my head. I certainly didn't feel like Einstein during my freshman physics classes. I was interested in the salary engineers made but became less engrossed in the subject matter as the year went on.

During the first semester of my sophomore year, I reached a personal crisis. I had thought my career course was set, but after a year of college physics, I wasn't so sure. The subject was no longer as enjoyable as it was in high school. *What was I supposed to do for a career now?*

I had admired several of my teachers in high school and thought about their kindness and genuine interest in helping me succeed in their classes. I felt drawn toward teaching as a career. Howev-

er, teaching had two significant drawbacks for me—teachers don't make much money, and they have to speak in front of people five or six times a day. I became physically ill when I was required to speak in front of groups. I hated the idea.

The following semester, I tested the waters by taking a speech class. The young speech teacher, Mrs. Thompson, was professional, articulate, and detailed in her explanations of what she wanted. Every time I had to give a speech, I knew what I had to do but had a pain in my gut. I felt nauseous, my breathing became labored, my throat became tight, my mouth went dry, and my hands started to sweat. For my first speech, I earned a C—a discouraging grade for me. I was determined to improve. After spending more time preparing, my grades went to Bs by midsemester. It was an exciting surprise when I earned an A on my final speech.

Perhaps I could get over my fear of public speaking. Would this be enough for me to change my career plans?

My father was a workaholic and had high expectations for his children—especially me, his oldest son. These factors might have been the building blocks for my perfectionistic personality. My inner conflict to find the perfect career choice made me wonder if there was a specific path I was “supposed” to take in life.

I made a list of personal attributes and wrestled with what this meant for me. I like people; it feels good to help others; math comes easy for me. With practice, maybe I could become more comfortable speaking in front of students. I know how to be frugal—my dad called me cheap because I would rather save money than spend it.

After labored deliberation and weeks of arguing with myself, I changed my major to Math Education.

Student teaching at a nearby junior high school proved fun and rewarding. People have since told me that I must be strange because I like working with teenagers.

When I finished student teaching, my supervising professor

asked me a thought-provoking question, “Who learned more, you or your students?” I took a few seconds to ponder. Considering all the education classes I’d taken during college, I realized I’d learned more from my students during those two and a half months of student teaching, and probably learned more from my students than I taught to them. I was grateful for that experience.

There were two junior high schools in Nampa. One included all the middle-income families, and that school enjoyed a good reputation in town. The other one—the school in which I student taught—had a challenging diversity of students along with related discipline problems. Kids whose parents worked in management positions, practiced medicine, or were college professors attended this school alongside students whose parents were migrant workers, minimum wage earners, or unemployed. I found the variety of student backgrounds, abilities, and needs stimulating.

Before graduation, I applied for a teaching position at that same junior high school. My principal seemed surprised that I wanted to teach in his building. Pleased with himself, he said, “Well, we must be doing something right if you want to work here.” After a short, informal interview, he offered me a job on the spot and I was more than happy to accept.

I wanted my students to learn the concepts I found fascinating, as well as help them to enjoy math like I did. I gained pleasure from the beauty of mathematical logic, and there were so many cool things you could do with numbers and formulas. Yes, a few of my friends thought that was weird too.

Each of the math teachers in our junior high taught regular math classes, plus one accelerated class and one lower class. I loved teaching Algebra 2 to the brightest students in the school and found it challenging to keep my lesson plans ahead of them.

My lower class was Consumer Math, for ninth graders who struggled with the basics of arithmetic. Many of these students missed school regularly and were in trouble in other classes. I spent

more time preparing for this class and more energy working with these students than with any other class. My reward started coming near the end of the school year. Many of my students were understanding math for the first time. This was my only period where students regularly thanked me for helping them learn. I found a great deal of joy in forming working relationships with these students and watching them succeed.

Anyone who understands math can teach accelerated students. Accelerated students did not need me; they were going to be successful regardless of their teacher. But my remedial students needed my help and appreciated the work we did together.

I was drawn to helping students and felt that the profession had found me. Teaching was the perfect career choice.



From a young age, I knew I wanted to have a family of my own. Now that I was secure in my career, I became more interested in finding the person with whom I could share the rest of my life and start a family.

A teacher friend and I were renting a two-bedroom apartment about a mile from our college. During my second year of teaching, I purchased a used motorcycle, and since there was no place to park it around our apartment, I looked for a safe location off the street to keep my baby.

On a beautiful Saturday afternoon, I saw two young ladies moving into an apartment down the street. One of those young ladies, June, and I had previously met under less-than-favorable circumstances, but since that was a couple of years earlier, I thought it worth the risk to ask her about a parking spot for my bike.

The less-than-favorable circumstances occurred during my senior year of college. My parents and younger brother, Scott, came to visit my sophomore sister, Vickie, and me in the spring. They

took us on a family swimming outing at Lucky Peak State Park outside of Boise. It was a perfect day for swimming. The only negative was that my sister had invited one of her annoying friends to join us. During our drive, this friend, June, started complaining about a woman she did not like. Much to my horror, she called the woman a “bitch.” My parents were not prudes, but I’d never heard anyone in our family use this term to describe another person. I was embarrassed and disgusted that my sister had invited this indiscrete brat with a disrespectful attitude.

The passage of time and the maturing process have a way of changing us. During the two years since our family swimming outing, June’s attitude and her speech had transformed. She was now working part-time at JCPenney, and she had an attractive, sweet personality. I asked her if I could park my motorcycle on her back patio. To my delight, she agreed. Mostly out of a sense of obligation, I asked if she wanted to go for a ride. I was a new rider and had no business taking anyone on the back of my bike. However, being a twenty-three-year-old male, I decided to go for it anyway.

The next Saturday afternoon, after a rainy morning, with June on the back, I rode my motorcycle safely on the street for a few miles to a large, grassy field near the local high school. Once on the field, I accelerated to a decent speed to impress June without compromising our safety. However, I was approaching the end of the wet field too fast. I braked, turned the wheel to avoid crashing into the fence, and managed to dump the bike. June and I slid together across soggy grass and mud.

Fortunately, neither of us was hurt. Aside from feeling embarrassed and needing a little cleaning up, all seemed well when I took June home. With a sweet smile, she told me that she had fun.

Later, wanting to make up for dumping her in the mud, I asked June on an official date. This time I chose to drive my car. We saw the movie *The Sting*, starring Robert Redford, and afterward had ice cream at the local Dairy Queen. Our conversation was relaxed,

times of silence felt natural, and we both enjoyed ourselves. No clean-up necessary this time. Thinking back, I can't recall having a more comfortable start to a relationship with a young lady.

Months later I learned that when June arrived home after our official date, she declared to her roommate, "I'm going to marry that man." Her roommate laughed out loud. "No, you watch, I'll marry him," June maintained. My response would have been much different had I heard about this declaration at that time. I would have run the other direction, making sure we never went out together again.

No one can know something this important that quickly—can they?