

I am an adoptive parent, still very involved in the lives of my adult children with Fetal Alcohol Syndrome. Chronic stress and compassion fatigue have placed me, along with other long term adoptive parents of F.A.S. youngsters, in a tiny minority sub-culture. Small groups living with a dominant culture tend to turn inward for support; I survive because of the caring and compassion of other F.A.S. parents.

Although, even in the enlightened seventies, adoption was still considered a “confidentiality” issue, adoptive parents with school age F.A.S. and Partial F.A.S. children were already the blunt edge of advocacy. We knew our children weren’t coping. We knew something was terribly wrong, but we had no information, no knowledge, no early interventions, and no help. There were services for those who were developmentally delayed; there was nothing but testing that went nowhere for the neurologically challenged. We struggled with a general lack of recognition of invisible disabilities, both by the Education System and by our family doctors. We fought the labels of “behaviour problem” and “poor parenting” by becoming a very visible presence in our children’s schools. Eventually we began to find each other.

In the Education System of the seventies and eighties, geared to the average, healthy, basically well-behaved child, adoptive parents of F.A.S. children needed each other desperately. No one else – (not even our own families,)—really understood our issues; no one else was as accepting of our difficult children. Other parents who were also doing extreme parenting became our mentors, our advocates, our counsellors, our supporters, our best friends.

And the support group that formed in our area shared something more; we could phone each other, any time, with urgent requests for prayer. We were all strong Christians, already active in our churches, pre-adoption, and even more spiritually involved as our lives became harder.

When we moved on, with our children, into high school drop-out and Youth Services, into the Legal System and Corrections, into Mental Health into all the problems connected with street living, employment disasters, addictions, suicide attempts, group housing, electronic monitoring, and welfare fraud, our reliance on each other grew. We went to Court, together. We supported each other at Case Management meetings with casts of thousands. We hung on each others’ telephones sharing despair

as our F.A.S. young people hid from their drug dealers, or tried, usually unsuccessfully, to parent their own children. We lay awake at night, praying for each other.

Other F.A.S. parents understand the gut-wrenching fear, the adrenaline rush, and the uncontrollable shaking brought on by nothing more than seeing a police car in the driveway. They understand the subtleties of family separation and breakdown caused by Social Services for Youth. They know the urgent need to visit an adult child on psyche ward or in jail, even though, according to the rest of his family, “He brought this on himself,” and, “He isn’t ever going to learn, anyway, so why bother?” Only another F.A.S. parent can share that special dread of bonding with a new grandchild, knowing that both baby and mother could permanently “disappear” from our lives at any time.

We are a support group, always present for each other and facing crisis after crisis together.

But we have all lived with chronic, energy draining stress for many years. Because we didn’t understand that we would be parenting these noncompliant Peter Pans forever, the luxury of taking care of ourselves never became a viable option. When our children were small, we had no time to think about ourselves; now we have no energy left for anything extra.

While other friends in our age group began to settle into the slightly easier routines of middle life, with time for more involvement in interesting church programs and community events, with grandchildren coming along and with retirement in the offering we continue to parent permanent teenagers. We are still advocating for our kids in court, still doing damage control after adoption reunions, still searching out job opportunities and safe living situations, still receiving urgent calls from Emergency.

And now we are also trying to build some kind of protection and security into the lives of our damaged children, because our own health pictures are changing. Although most of us are only in our early fifties, we have been denied a comfortable middle age. We have rapidly jumped from “still young” to looking and feeling much older, --(seniors’ discounts are now being offered regularly,)--and we are no longer healthy.

The people in my support group aren't getting old, yet, but they are getting sick. Really sick. It isn't just flu anymore.

Two summers ago I lost a friend, an adoptive mother of four special needs children, to a stress related disease. More recently, a young grandma in our support group had a heart attack. A special friend, one of my strongest supporters, deeply committed to prayer, has just had a kidney removed; another support group member has a rare variety of arthritis and is waiting for some dangerous surgery. One of our moms, with her youngest son in jail, found herself in a prolonged struggle against overactive tear ducts; she finished off her year overweight, and with a diagnosis of diabetes. Another mom, who also had a disabled son in jail, couldn't cry, and finished the year in hospital, depressed and suicidal. And two of us are very ill with cancer.

The people I feel really safe with, the people I can trust to understand, regardless, the people I can count on for prayer in any circumstances, won't always be there for me. My support group is dying.

It would be easy to say, "God? Where are you, anyway? I am feeling so abandoned here."

But it was God who brought these extraordinary people into my life in the first place. It was God who pulled the threads together, who connected the group to one another, who helped us build such strong foundations of caring and support. We were brought into loving relationship, as much for the sake of our special needs children as for ourselves. We have walked in the footsteps of our Creator, and sometimes we have been carried; God isn't about to abandon any of us.

It would be easy to say, "God? How can you let this happen?" You know I need these people."

The relationship between God and I hadn't grown very much since childhood, when my parents taught me two simple lessons; "Offer it up," and "Praise the Lord in all circumstances." As life became more and more complicated, those were no longer adequate, but nothing developed to replace them. Eventually, permanent stress and compassion fatigue drastically changed both my health and my relationship with God.

God knew, long before I became aware, that my illness was making me step away from everybody; that I had become unable to trust anyone; that I need human caring, human comfort and human compassion; that my most urgent necessity was for the real Source of Love to have skin.

My needs were filled with God's gift; the provision of exceptionally kind, loving, and compassionate support people. And now I am able to trust that God will continue to be constant, even in lives that continue to be devastated.

My children's progressive difficulties, my own health issues, and the severe illnesses within my support group have brought me to a new understanding of Romans 8:28 "We know that in all things God works for good."