



FRAGILE: HANDLE WITH CARE

By Marilyn Sharpe

My husband and I recently saw "The Glass Menagerie" by Tennessee Williams at the Guthrie. It is the heart wrenching play about the Wingfields, a family that cannot look reality full in the face, tell the truth, pull together, and live into it. As a result, all of the characters are running away – some literally, some figuratively.

The father, "a telephone repairman, who fell in love with long distance," abandoned the family, when the children were young. Amanda, the mother, lives in the idealized world of her Southern childhood, remembering one day she had "seventeen gentlemen callers." She wants to reclaim a time when she was sought after, when the future was hers to choose and full of promise. Brittle, grasping, controlling, she really only wants her children to be safe and happy, but inadvertently drives them away. Tom, her son, an aspiring writer, is trapped in work he despises, to support his mother and sister. He escapes into movies, alcohol, and novels. Eventually, he leaves by the fire escape, achieving physical distance, but never escaping the guilt and memories. Laura, Tom's sister, is pathologically shy and self-conscious. Frail, with a pronounced limp, she has run away from the world her mother has hoped for her – gentlemen callers and a business career - escaping into a world of candlelight, her father's Victrola records, and a collection of glass animal figurines, her glass menagerie.

So, what is the message here for families?

All of us have received a package, marked "Fragile: Handle with Care." We know it is breakable, and treat it accordingly. When we receive the gift of our family relationships, they, too, should come with the stamp, "Fragile: Handle with Care." The people in our lives are as fragile as Laura's glass menagerie ... and so much more important.

PHYSICALLY – We know that our infants are physically fragile: we support their floppy necks, protect the soft spot in the skull, and know not to shake, jerk, or drop. We protect them from things that are sharp and hot and dangerous. Let us be on the lookout for our older children, too. Let us give them safe boundaries, age appropriate responsibilities, and keep them from speeding to adulthood, damaging or despising those precious bodies.

EMOTIONALLY – As children on the playground, we chanted, "Sticks and stones can break my bones, but words can never hurt me!" Even then, we knew that was wrong. Let us speak words in love. Let us refrain from meanness. Let us listen deeply and take seriously the emotional wounds of our children and youth. Let us, in the words of poet e e cummings, "Be of love a little more careful than of anything."

INTELLECTUALLY – Our children come to us, naturally curious, filled with wonder and a desire to discover and understand. Let us support that natural desire and gift to be lifelong learners. Model a continuing passion for learning. Find out how our children learn best, and share that with those who teach them. Support their unique gifts, with opportunities to learn. Catch them learning and affirm it.

SPIRITUALLY – Thank God every day for these cherished children, made in the image of their creator, entrusted to us to love and nurture for a while. In all that we do, help them see and hear and experience the love of God we know in Jesus Christ. In this season of Lent and Easter, let us be especially mindful ... and remind-full ... of this ultimate gift of God – Jesus, given to die for us, giving us hope and promise of abundant life, now and forever.

FAMILY ACTIVITIES

1. At your dinner table, give each person a small bandaid. Invite each to share one thing in their lives that is challenging, hard, painful, and in need of understanding.
2. Tuck your children and youth into bed, in the dark. Then, just listen...
3. Ask each of your children to complete the following sentences:
 - My favorite things about being this age are...
 - The hardest things about being this age are...
 - I wish all adults understood this about me...
4. Ask, "What can I do to understand you better?"
5. Ask, "What can I do to better support you?"