

A
Brilliant
Night

*Experiencing God in the
Hard, Unexpected, and Unfinished*

JULI ABLE

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The stories in this book are true,
with some details adjusted to respect
the privacy of those involved.

Prologue



The stories in this book about my family's challenges are vague. This is intentional to protect the privacy of others and to allow these stories a broader reach. While I choose not to delve into our specifics, the following background information may help.

During our application process for adoption, we learned about reactive attachment disorder (RAD). The disorder was briefly mentioned in a required online slide show as a rare condition that could devastate adoptive families. Two slides in a twenty-minute presentation touched on this and shared only the most overt symptoms to watch for. To be honest, I felt immune—as though it couldn't happen to us. Maybe because it was presented as uncommon; maybe I ignored it because I deeply wanted to adopt; and also at play may have

been an erroneous belief that our investment in careful discernment and prayer eliminated this already-remote risk. It was easy to ignore, until it wasn't.

Experts explain that "RAD develops when a child's brain is impacted by trauma, often abuse and neglect, during the first few years of life."¹ Children affected with RAD have difficulty forming emotional attachments to others and difficulty seeking or accepting physical or emotional closeness. They may be unpredictable, hard to console, and hard to discipline.² This condition is more common than often presented, as a 2004 study illuminates: "While RAD is rare in the general population, it is common in abuse cases. In one study of toddlers in foster care who had been maltreated, 38-40% of the children met the diagnostic criteria for RAD. Many older children who have delayed disclosure of their early abuse also suffer from undiagnosed RAD."³

Often the primary target of a child's RAD behavior is the adoptive mom. "She is the person to whom (the adoptive child) most wants to connect and the person with whom it seems the most dangerous. A mother can't be trusted. She may be an abandoner."⁴ Because of this, "the child with RAD goes to great lengths to push away Mom, often via triangulation and manipulation. Many moms say they 'feel crazy' because no one else sees or experiences the same RAD behaviors as she does."⁵ At the same time, "the child with RAD often charms (other caregivers and significant adults) and leads them to believe that Mom is unreasonable."⁶ This dynamic

often creates confusion as to the nature of the conflict between the child and Mom because other caregivers are not directly affected by it. This confusion can result in a lack of understanding and support.⁷

In clinical research, participant caregivers, particularly adoptive mothers, described feelings of exhaustion, fragility, shock, surprise, a sense of unrelenting burden, and unpreparedness for the intensity of challenging behaviors of children with RAD.⁸ Feelings of failure, disappointment, and confusion related to the unpredictability of their children with RAD's inappropriate attachments to others were shared throughout. Caregivers of children with RAD expressed intense worry, anxiety, and stress surrounding parenting and caregiving their children.⁹

RAD looks different across individuals. I initially experienced it as a void in our adopted son, James, and his avoidance of me. As long as I kept my distance, things appeared to be okay on the surface. But if I sought connection and attachment, or worse, if I sought to parent with boundaries and instruction, symptoms escalated. Even with significant professional therapy, our daily home life was a minefield of dissociation, manipulation, hostility, lack of trust and controlling behaviors, provoking anger in others, superficially and selectively charming others, chronic lying, and creating conflict and distrust among and between others (splitting or triangulating relationships).

These behaviors were symptoms of complex trauma—which was incredibly heartbreaking—

stemming from wounds and sustained childhood trauma beyond what we could imagine. Placed in a similar circumstance, anyone would likely display symptoms or no longer be alive. I believe they enabled James to survive his first ten years of life. And I share them here to illuminate our reality.

Through the years of navigating this, I've observed human nature, in seeking to understand, also wants to assign fault to someone. Perhaps this is innate in our attempts at making sense of something. Yet in blaming, we miss a grander invitation. Amor Towles in his book *A Gentleman in Moscow* describes such an opportunity when struggle crosses our path. If we refuse blame, shame, and self-pity, we discover an invitation into a community he names "The Confederacy of the Humbled." Here's what he says:

"The Confederacy of the Humbled is a close-knit brotherhood whose members travel with no outward markings, but who know each other at a glance. For having fallen suddenly from grace, those in the Confederacy share a certain perspective. Knowing beauty, influence, fame, and privilege to be borrowed rather than bestowed, they are not easily impressed. They are not quick to envy or take offense. They certainly do not scour the papers in search of their own names. They remain committed to living amongst their peers, but they greet adulation with caution,

ambition with sympathy, and condescension
with an inward smile."¹⁰

This is where I desire to be—on a journey with friends.
My hope is that you will accept this open invitation to
discover the divine and a community of friends in your
hard, unexpected, and unfinished places. Join me?

Introduction

I've been thinking lately about Abraham and his experiences with God, especially that time in the thick of night under a canopy of stars. The Bible tells us that God brought him outside and spoke, saying "Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them. . . . So shall your descendants be" (Genesis 15:5 NRSV).

Maybe Abraham had been sitting in his tent, discouraged and lost in thought, when all of a sudden, he heard a booming, unmistakable voice tell him to go outside. And that same distinct, audible voice told him to look up and spoke of promised descendants more numerous than the stars shining overhead.

Or maybe it was more like this: One evening as the hustle and noise of a workday wound down and

things fell quiet, familiar voices of doubt, fear, and discouragement began to clamor within Abraham. They pummeled him with questions, problems, and a litany of what-ifs. Abraham took in his temporary tent accommodations, his ever-aging, still-barren wife, Sarah, and the lonely quiet of a home with no children. He had listened and followed God as best he knew how. He had been promised a new homeland and a really big family, yet nothing was happening. He fled outside, needing a change of scenery and some fresh air. In the growing darkness he sat in the quiet and sought God. As the sky deepened from purple to navy to black, he released those swirling questions and nagging doubts to God—simply saying them out loud and sending them off with the wind.

As his insides calmed, he began to notice the stars. One by one they emerged, slowly filling the sky until they crammed every corner and every empty space. It became difficult to distinguish one from another. He had never seen so many stars. Stunning and magnificent!

He sat, mesmerized by the sparkles of light animating the dark. Quietly it dawned on him. *God desires to give me descendants like these stars . . . glorious and too many to count.* A deep peace washed over him, and he simply knew: this was God's presence *with* him and God's promise *for* him. The picture of that star-filled sky stayed with Abraham, drawn in his mind's eye so that when doubting voices tried to invade again, Abraham

simply recalled the stars and clung to the promise God had given him.

My own experiences with God have been more like this latter version: subtle and slow, asking me to show up and make room to get quiet, to deliberately ask my questions and to speak my doubts into a dark night that is anything but empty.

Maybe people thought Abraham was crazy when he tried to describe what happened that night. It's hard to put into words how you know when a starry night sky is a meeting place with God.

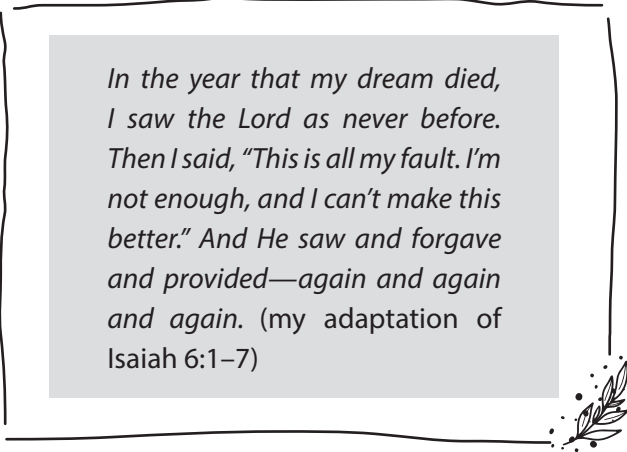
This collection of stories shares the sparks of light that began to fill my own dark season. My son once captured its essence with a question: "Why did God ask us to adopt and then let it fail?" That question frames my story. It's an important question because the one who is asking matters, as does our adoption and our adopted son, James. It also gets to the heart of a deeper question: can I trust God?

But this is not an adoption story. I do not presume to speak with authority on adoption. Nor can I answer my son's question. There are and always will be secret things that belong only to God. He is Mystery. But what I can do is share what He has revealed about Himself, me, and His love, character, and faithfulness. These revelations are mine.

And yet these experiences are not just for me. There is a journey here, one that is open to all of us. A deeper

life with God lies beyond our apparent failures and even our successes. It lies beneath whatever experience or circumstance has done the most to break us. In fact, that can be the doorway.

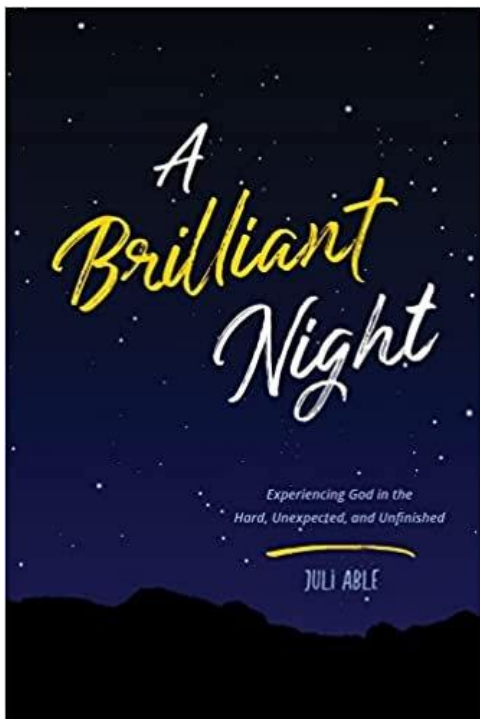
At least, that is where I discovered *my* doorway.
Perhaps you may find hints of yours here as well.



*In the year that my dream died,
I saw the Lord as never before.
Then I said, "This is all my fault. I'm
not enough, and I can't make this
better." And He saw and forgave
and provided—again and again
and again. (my adaptation of
Isaiah 6:1–7)*

And this is my account of His faithfulness . . .

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