

**Loving the Dandelions**  
**servicing God's children where they are**

**by Daniel Roth**

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## Introduction

"Until someone like you cares a whole awful lot, nothing is going to get better, it's not."  
- Theodore Giesel (Dr. Seuss)

We live in a dangerous, scary world. Most kids are lucky enough to be sheltered from the worst of it. Unfortunately, for far too many the world is a confusing and scary place. This book is dedicated to the kids of the world who are marginalized and hurting, for any reason, and to the ordinary people who give their own time and energy to try to serve them. If we want to change the direction of society, we all need to step in and do our part. It can not be acceptable for one child to fall through the cracks.

"I don't want your sympathy for the needs of humanity, I want your muscle." - Robert Folghum (author of Everything I Need to Know I learnt in Kindergarten)

The statistics can't be ignored. According to DoSomething.org ([www.dosomething.org/tipsandtools/1-facts-about-child-abuse](http://www.dosomething.org/tipsandtools/1-facts-about-child-abuse)) 1 in 4 girls and 1 in 6 boys will be sexually abused before age 17.

Child Help ([www.childhelp.org](http://www.childhelp.org)) reports these further disturbing statistics:

- A report of child abuse is made every 10 seconds
- Almost five children die every day as a result of child abuse
- It is estimated that 60-85% of child fatalities due to maltreatment are not recorded as such on the death certificates
- Over 60% of people in drug rehabilitation centers reported being abused or neglected as a child
- About 30% of abused and neglected children will later abuse their own children, continuing the horrible cycle of abuse.
- About 80% of 21 year olds that were abused as children met criteria for at least one psychological disorder.
- Abused children are 25% more likely to experience teen pregnancy.
- Abused teens are 3 times less likely to practice safe sex, putting them at greater risk for STDs.

The statistics clearly tell us that you don't need to work in a crisis shelter to encounter kids in need. If you are a Sunday school teacher, day care worker, camp counselor, scout leader or active in any community group where children are present you, most likely, encounter children in crisis. While there is no magic solution to all the issues we can do our best to serve the kids God puts in our path for the times they are with us.

"We live in a world in which we need to share responsibility. It's easy to say 'It's not my child, not my community, not my world, not my problem.' Then there are those who see the need and respond. I consider those people my heroes." - Fred "Mr." Rogers

We need to want for every child what we want for our own children. All our success' and failures are interrelated. When we fail any child we fail society and we fail our own children's future. John Dewey put it clearly when he said "What the best and wisest parent wants for his own child, that must the community want for all it's children. Any other idea for our schools is narrow and unlovely; acted upon it destroys our democracy."

This book is a collection of stories and lessons learned in over 20 years of dealing with God's children; many of them broken and hurting. These stories have grown out of the time I spent as a counselor at a camp for children with special needs, a Sunday School teacher and, most recently, helping at a crisis shelter, providing temporary respite for preschool children.

This book is not for the professional psychologist but for the everyday person trying to serve God's children they best they can. Hopefully it will give some ideas and perspective when dealing with kids that don't react, for whatever reason, in ways we are familiar with.

## Chapter 1 - Dandelions

Dandelions are my favorite flower. Whenever I see a lawn chemical truck, or have to mow over new dandelion flowers I feel a little sad. They remind me of Trisha.

I am a counselor at a camp for children with special needs and one of my goals is to talk to each of the campers every day. It has always been a policy of our camp to take any campers that would have trouble adapting to another camp. This means when you approach a new camper you are never sure what kind of response you will receive. We have had children who are deaf, blind, mute, and all different levels of physical, mental, and emotional handicaps. But no matter what challenges each camper has brought we have always adapted enough to make it a week of growth for everyone.

This year I noticed a new camper sitting with the group, but not interacting. I walked up and said "Hi, I'm Dan, what's your name?". She didn't answer but proudly showed me her name tag. I responded "Hi Trisha, I'm glad you're here!"

Well, I must have been the first one to talk to her because from that moment on whenever Trisha saw me she was right by my side. She ate with us, went on hikes with us, and when we sat down for a rest she was always right there.

Trisha was a cute little girl who happens to have Cerebral Palsy. She could walk, with a severe limp, and she could not talk. She had trouble with her muscle control and sometimes ate sloppily. But she could communicate with her smile and her attitude. Every time you saw her there was a huge smile on her face. She was determined not to let the cerebral palsy hold her back.

She wanted to do everything. We had a 3/4 mile walk to the dining hall and she insisted that she walk it. She did not want to take the bus we used to transport those who had trouble with that distance. She insisted on walking, even when she was in severe pain.

On the first day of camp I saw Trisha struggle to bend over and pick up a yellow dandelion flower. My initial reaction was, we are in the woods, its spring, there are all kinds of beautiful wild flowers blooming.

Why would she want a dandelion?

She took the yellow weed and put it in her coat pocket. After the week was over and parents were coming to pick the children up, I saw Trisha crying. I walked over to her, I was going to tell her that we would see her next year. But what she did when I approached her was more powerful than any words I could have used. She reached into her pocket, removed her prized, and by now slightly mutilated, dandelion, and gave it to me.

Even if I had wanted to I could not have responded, I was choked up with tears. I took the dandelion stuck it in my shirt pocket with the flower sticking out.

To me it was more beautiful than any rose or carnation could have been.

Why do I love dandelions? Because they remind me of Trisha and of all the other dandelions of the world. We all know them, and at times we have probably been one. They are the people who, when you see them, it is easy to turn your head and walk away. They are used to being ignored, and don't expect attention. They are the handicapped, the old, the unpopular, the hurting.

It's easy to be nice to the popular, beautiful people. Everyone wants to wear a rose in their lapel. Everyone wants to be part of the "in" crowd. But Jesus didn't hang out with the roses and carnations, he hung out with the dandelions.

Let's see if today we can put dandelions in our lapels.

How far you go in life depends on your being tender with the young, compassionate with the aged, sympathetic with the striving and tolerant of the weak and strong. Because someday in like you will have been all of these. - George Washington Carver

## Chapter 2 - My New Favorite Place

I have new favorite place. It's a row house in York city that also serves as a crisis shelter for kids up to age six. It is a safe place for kids that don't always come from safe places. My time there has been (and continues to be) an incredible experience and I thank God that he lets me be part of the team serving these kids. Many preconceived notions I had of the families served (97% of the families live below the poverty level), have been stretched and altered. Because of the center I am much less judgmental of other's situations.

I remember one of my first weekends working; I was playing with a group of 3 and 4 year olds. I jokingly scooped one of the kids up in my arms, expecting him to laugh and try roll out of my arms. Instead he stopped laughing and snuggled in close. I held him a little tighter. The room grew quiet. I looked down and the other kids had stopped playing and were lined up waiting their turn. At that moment I realized that, more than anything, these kids wanted safe arms to hold them; someone to say "your special and safe with me". I also realized that the line of kids in front of me represented a long line of kids; a line that would run down the steps, out the door and around the corner. In a larger sense they represent all of God's kids marginalized by society, all the kids that only want a safe place to sleep and calm arms to hold them. I am grateful to God that He occasionally lets me be those arms.

My time serving these kids has made me more aware of their situations. One morning I was serving the children breakfast. I brought out the plates of eggs, toast and bacon and sat them in front of the kids. As I got to the last child I, jokingly, sat down and put her food in front of myself and pretended like I was going to eat it. She folded her arms and put her head down. She was prepared to sit through breakfast and not eat. I was hoping she was going to laugh but her silent acceptance was more heartbreaking then if she would have cried. I quickly gave her the food and tried to convince her I was joking. The child who never cries is more troubling than the one that always does. At least the one crying has some expectation of their needs being met.

Another conversation went like this:

Little girl: "Mr. Dan, I'm sad my Daddy is in jail (again)".

Me: "I'm sorry"

Little girl "At least I can still see you"

I was speechless. I just picked her up and held her close for while. At nap time the same little girl said "Mr. Dan, you will be here when I wake up and you will love me." My shift ended while she was sleeping but, of course, I stayed until after she woke up.

Sometimes it bothers me that I can only protect and nurture these kids for the time they are with me. When I question if I am really making a difference I think of the words of



Doc Childre when he said "An aware person loves all children he or she meets and interacts with for you are a caretaker for those moments in time." Knowing these kids caretakers, for many reasons, often let them down makes me more aware of my influence during the "moments in time" they are with me. When they leave the center I want them to leave knowing that someone thinks they are special and loves them unconditionally

Occasionally, God lets us get a glimpse that we do make a difference. I was meeting with the mother of a child that had just spent a few days with us. The girl had spent time with us before. The mother said that the girl talked about me at home and then shared this conversation:

Girl: "Mr. Dan is at the center crying"

Mom: "Why is Mr. Dan crying"

Girl: "Because he misses me"

While I don't want kids to think I'm sitting around crying, what I try to do is leave each child with this feeling -- that someone cares about them and misses them when they aren't there.

### **Chapter 3 - I Know You Will Take Me Home**

From the first day he came into our Sunday school class it seemed like he would follow me around. At story time he would always want to sit beside me. At craft time he always wanted me to help him. Once when I was helping someone else he tugged on my shirt sleeve and said "Mr. Dan aren't you supposed to be helping me?" I tried to be patient with him, while not ignoring the rest of the class.

After class one day his mother was a little late. He was, of course, standing right beside me. He looked up at me and said "Mr. Dan, its o.k. if my mom doesn't pick me up because I know that you will take me home and then I will have a Dad".

I had a similar experience helping in a room for three year olds. There was a little girl who would cling to me. She always wanted me to be the one to help her and to sit with her. One day we were "having tea" at play time when she looked at me and said "Let's play pretend and I'll call you Daddy".

I know that I did not replace a Father in their lives, but I also know that they were starting to form opinions about what a Father should be like and what a Fathers love looked like. For a couple hours on Sunday morning they were looking at me, in their own ways they told me so. We should never underestimate our influences. Little eyes are watching what you do. We all have a responsibility to every child that crosses our paths. We have a duty to each of them to protect and nurture them for the times they are with us.

## Chapter 4 - The Stable

In 1989 at the age of 48 my father died of cancer. It was only years later that I realized the impact that he had on my life. He was a quiet man who avoided any attention, recognition or glory. He was always willing to do a favor. He was the first one to volunteer if the church needed painting or other odd jobs and every fall he would patch up the worse spots on the roof of the trailer owned by the old man down the street; hoping to get him through one more winter. When Theodore Roosevelt said "Do what you can, with what you have, where you are." I think he was talking about my Dad.

But the one thing that I most remember is the nativity stables. One year my mother painted a ceramic nativity scene. My father then built a wooden stable for it. When people came to visit they would comment on the stable and ask where they purchased it. My father ended up building many more stables. People would bring some of their figurines to him and he would build one to scale for them. They were all shocked when they attempted to pay and he would never accept payment, no matter how much they insisted.

We weren't rich. My father worked in a factory and, because it was important to them, my parents struggled to put five kids through Catholic School. I couldn't understand what it would have hurt to accept money for a job well done. Dad was a man of few words, but I'll never forget when he looked at me and said "If I took money then it would be work". I realized that he wouldn't enjoy making them anymore if he did it for money. The thought of giving something, that someone really wanted, at no cost made the creating worthwhile.

I really believe that we all have stables in us somewhere. Maybe we can't work with wood, but maybe we are teachers, counselors, artists or just ears to listen or shoulders to cry on. We all have something to give, expecting nothing in return.

As we travel through life, if we are lucky, we will meet a few people to hold up as examples. I was lucky to have one as my father. If you're lucky enough to still have your father around let him know how much you cherish him. Thank him for all the stables he's given you.

We also need to be aware of how our actions impact others. It is often what we do that people remember, not what we say. My Father passed lessons on to me about the importance of being a humble servant, about not always needing to be thanked. It is these attitudes that let us truly be useful. The service is reward enough.

## Chapter 5 - My Week with Hunter

In 2002 my camper at our camp for children with special needs was Hunter. Hunter was 9 years old, but physically he was the size of a four or five year old. His vocabulary consisted of short sentences that were sometimes difficult to understand. Hunter also had an incredible amount of energy and curiosity. He was constantly on the run and into everything.

Hunter and his sister Sydney have a disease called Sanfilippo syndrome. According to BensDream.Org:

"Children afflicted with Sanfilippo Syndrome are missing an essential enzyme that breaks down strings of a complex body sugar called heparan sulfate. The partially broken-down sugar, or mucopolysaccharide, accumulates in the brain and the body's cells and tissue causing progressive damage. The storage process affects children's appearances, bodily functions and development. Sanfilippo children tend to look alike and have similar health problems.

A Sanfilippo child appears normal at birth and develops within the range of normal for the first year or two, but as more and more cells become damaged symptoms begin to appear. Eventually, the build-up of mucopolysaccharides will cause hyperactivity, sleep disorders, loss of speech, mental retardation, dementia and finally death. Life expectancy for a child with Sanfilippo Syndrome is between 12 to 20 years.

There is currently no treatment or cure."

Hunter's sister Sydney also came along to camp. After they arrived their mother went with Sydney and her counselor. Their Father and I took Hunter and his stuff to our room. Hunter was not content to sit as his Dad offered advice on dealing with him. So his Father tried to shout out as much advice as he could as we both chased Hunter around the camp.

After his parents left I let Hunter explore around the camp. He was fascinated with the creek and the fire ring. He was convinced that the creek was full of "ow-ye-gators" and crocodiles.

After an hour of exploring the camp area it was time to walk to lunch. Walk may not be the best way to describe our journey to lunch, Hunter loved to run. About  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the way to the dining hall there is a small man-made frog pond. You could almost always see a few frogs sitting on the rocks or lily pads. Hunter loved the frog pond. He would run up to the frog pond saying "Touch it, touch it" or "Catch one". A few times Hunter did manage to touch a frog that was sitting in the grass or on a rock close to the edge. Before and after every meal we would stop at the frog pond. As the week wore on I became more and more appreciative of the break we took at the frog pond. It provided a little rest before we finished our run to the dining hall.

Once at the dining hall Hunter would head over to a stuffed Bear and Deer displayed in the corner. Depending on his mood Hunter either wanted to hug them, take them home or shoot them. We would then wander through the tables until it was closer to the time to eat. Usually he would sit through the meal but there was an occasional piece of flying silverware and once a "spilled" glass of milk.

As it got closer to bedtime I made the bed up furthest from the door for Hunter and the bed closest to the door for myself. Around 8:15 Hunter said he was going to bed, climbed up the stairs, climbed in my bed and fell asleep. If he was going to sleep I was going to let him sleep where ever he wanted.

I was worried about him getting up at night so I took the mattress off of what was to be his bed and put it on the floor next to the bed he was now sleeping in. I slept there. If Hunter got up I would know. Around 2:00 am I heard Hunter sit up in bed. I sat up and leaned in close so he could see I was there. He kissed me on the cheek, went back to sleep, and slept the rest of the night.

Hunter was very concerned toward all the campers in wheelchairs. Whenever he saw them he would go over to them and hug and kiss them. We would gather everyday as a group for worship. Because of Hunter's attention span I wouldn't join the group until the last minute. All the other campers would already be there. The wheelchairs usually gathered together in the widest area. Hunter would move from wheel chair to wheelchair giving each camper a hug.

The second morning Hunter woke up before me (or anyone else). Once Hunter was awake he was awake! So I quickly got dressed, got him dressed and took Hunter to the bathroom to get ready for the day. The bathroom was large with 2 showers and a few sinks. I got Hunter started brushing his teeth. As I was trying to put my contacts in Hunter became bored and headed for the door. He opened the door and was heading for the hallway. I stopped him and moved my stuff to the sink closer to the door. I finished putting my contacts and brushing my teeth with my foot holding the door shut. By 6:15am we were out at the basketball hoop shooting the baskets.

Hunter was funny to watch when he was shooting a basketball. For someone his size he could make a large number of baskets. After he made a basket he would either say "Michael Jordan" or "Good job, Thank-you your welcome".

Sydney, Hunter's sister, was a big help to me. Often times Sydney would help me understand what Hunter was trying to say. Hunter would often go through periods of high energy where he would run from place to place getting into everything. Right before one of these episodes he would start giggling. Sydney told me that was his "bad laugh".

One day Hunter and I were down by the creek. Hunter was searching around the trees for stones and pinecones. I saw him pick something up and say "Hug it" and move it toward his face to kiss it. I got his hand before it reach his face and saw he was holding

a crayfish head. It was just the shell, left over from a Raccoons lunch. I took the shell and threw it into creek. He was very angry at me and wanted me to jump in the creek to go get it back. When I wouldn't give in he kicked me in shins. I sat Hunter on a nearby chair until he calmed down. After a few minutes he got up, walked over to me, put his hands on my cheeks, said "Sar-wee" and kissed my cheek.

As the week wore on I found the things that would keep Hunter still for a while. Someone that Don knew had donated a whole box of stickers. There were literally thousands of stickers in the box. Every once in a while Hunter would go into the craft room where the stickers were and look through the box. He would carefully look through all of the stickers. Pick three or four and put them on his shirt.

Sometimes when Hunter got angry he would kick or push something. Usually I could anticipate these and prevent any damage. One day we were at the cafeteria. After meals Hunter liked to carry the dirty dishes to the kitchen area to be washed, so I assumed that he may also like carrying the milk over to our table. I got a cup of coffee, picked up the water pitcher and tried to hand Hunter the milk. In the mean time Hunter saw a loaf of bread and decided he wanted a piece. I told him that we couldn't eat yet. He not only didn't take the milk but he started kicking the trash can. I was standing there holding coffee, a water pitcher, and a carton of milk. I spilled my coffee trying to put them down, and I still didn't get to him in time to prevent the can from being kicked over. Luckily it was before the meal started and there was not much in it.

Hunter loved baseball. He was constantly searching for anything to use as a bat and ball. Sometimes he would sit on the ground and pick up a little stick and a small pinecone and hit the pinecone with the stick.

Someone from Don's church created a miniature golf course for us. They built portable castles and windmills for us to hit the ball through. A local miniature golf course donated some old putters and we used tennis balls for golf balls. Hunter loved the game ! He was pretty good at hitting the ball through the targets, but he would pull back the club and hit the ball really hard. Then he would yell "Home Run" and chase after the ball.

We had some rain on Thursday so as we were walking to the dining hall for our last dinner of the year there were puddles on the road. Hunter managed to find every puddle. Initially I tried to stop him but then I realized that we were at camp and Hunter wouldn't have been Hunter if he would have walked by the puddles.

Before the beginning of this week I thought that Hunter would be hyper-active, stubborn, and prone to tantrums. I wasn't wrong. But these are symptoms of his disease not who he is. Hunter is the little boy who loves baseball so much that even a small twig and a tiny pinecone become a bat and ball. He is the little hands on my face and the little voice saying "Sar-wee" after getting angry. Hunter is running to the dining hall and running back, stopping only to chase frogs or hug the kids in wheel chairs. Hunter is jumping in every mud puddle on the way to lunch. On the first night at camp, after chasing him around all day, Hunter woke up in the middle of the night. I immediately

thought about the note from his mother on his health form stating that Hunter got home sick and cried for his parents. I went over to let him know someone was there. He leaned over, put his hands on either side of my face, gave me a kiss on the cheek, laid down and went back to sleep. At that moment my apprehension left and I knew everything would be o.k.. At that moment Hunter left a permanent mark on my heart.

## Chapter 6 - Loving the Unlovable

Mother Teresa was once giving a radio interview. The interviewer waited for a commercial break and then, check book in hand, asked Mother Teresa how he could help. She looked at him and said "Find someone no one else loves and love them." That is the real test of love. How do we treat people who seem ungrateful or undeserving. What if someone appears to be doing nothing to help themselves? How do we treat them? These are the hard questions. Anyone can be nice to people like themselves it's hard to reach out to those that are different. How do we love those that seem unlovable?

How should we react to those who appear undeserving or unappreciative of our help? The parent who has given up getting ahead and sees "playing the system" as their only option. The man whose addictions have him held so tightly that he can't make good decisions. The child so used to being tossed around, ignored and abused that the only responses he knows are bad ones. I believe these are the people Mother Teresa was talking about and, more importantly, I am convinced these are the people Jesus calls us to love.

I'm not talking about "enabling", I'm talking about treating all people with a level of dignity. Listening to their stories and reaching out our hands in a non-judgmental way. John Harrigan said "People need loving the most when they deserve it the least."

"Treat people as if they are what they ought to be, and you help them become what they are capable of being" - Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

In my dealings I've encountered many people that, from a distance, it would be easy to judge and condemn. People who have made many, and sometimes continue to make, bad choices. When we put away our judgements and really listen to their stories we can start to see the layers of hurt and hopelessness that led them to where they are. Many times they don't see a way out or the way out seems so hard so they slip into all the bad habits they were raised with. Slip into the only reality they really know.

How do we love them? By treating them with dignity and listening to their stories. It is hard to hate up close. We need to view them as broken and hurting people, even if they are putting up a defense that looks like anger or bitterness. Dealing with some parents at the center, I've come to accept that what often comes across as anger is often fear of being judged. When they realize I am there to help, not condemn, most come around. I now have a good relationship with some parents that would hardly talk to me the first time we met.



## **Chapter 7 - I Thought You Were a Man**

One afternoon at the shelter I was playing with a 4 year old boy. We were joking around and he kicked at me. I looked at him and said that we don't kick each other at the center. He looked back and said "I thought you were a man."

A baby woke up and was crying. I got up to go back to the bedroom to get him when another child asked if I was going to go back and "beat his ass".

A little girl was playing with dolls and came over and said "Pop pop the kids just won't listen and I want you to go in and beat them".

A family with 4 kids under six came in because their mother was in the hospital after their father beat her while they were home. The oldest girl told me that she doesn't like "old men".

As the only man working at the center, I take seriously the messages my actions and words send. I make sure the kids clearly understand that, no matter what they do, I would never hit them. I also realize how important it is that I react in a calm, gentle way. I try to show them that discipline does not have to include yelling and hitting. Am I making a difference? Will they remember these lessons? I'm not sure, but I am sure when they are with me I will always try to show them a better way.

Because of my experiences I have a hard line opinion of corporal punishment. I believe that we should never touch a child in anger. I also believe that we, as humans, can not be trusted to never touch a child in anger if we have already given ourselves permission to hit. There are other, better, ways to discipline. Spanking is the easy way to enforce our power over a child, but all it really teaches is that the biggest, strongest one wins.

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