Making Mistakes

Shamae Budd

My four-year-old son is not a quiet child. He is the kind of child that people call "spirited," "high energy," or "all boy."

His enthusiasm for the beautiful, rare cosmic bliss of living seems limitless. His zeal exists in all directions, at all times of day, and in all seasons and sizes and shapes and colors. It is technicolor joie de vivre. As an illustration, he recently spent the morning stomping from room to room in cowboy boots, a tutu, and a yellow construction hat while he held a tambourine and a rainbow sparkle wand, chanting, "CHAOS! CHAOS! CHAOS!" at the top of his lungs. After several minutes, he paused, looked in my direction, and asked with earnest curiosity, "Mom, what's chaos?"

I should have known then not to expect him to be quiet.

For a year, during his second hurtling trip around the sun, we lived in my parents' basement. It was a beautiful year—Edenic—with raspberries bursting on the old canes in springtime and our little boy furtively climbing the stairs on Saturday mornings, whispering, "Pop pop," hoping for pancakes.

A year after we moved out, my youngest brother moved in, along with his fiancée and their new baby. My little son and I were in the habit of visiting his grandparents regularly, and I did not anticipate that this habit would change. But simple logistics were against us: babies need sleep; sound travels easily in old houses; and if there's anything my little chaos machine knows how to make, it's *sound*.

Even at his most reserved, he is a loudly whispered, "Chaos, chaos, chaos," shivering with energy, ready to burst at the smallest spark. All it took was an enthusiastic superhero's leap, a full-throttled run down the hall, a jubilant whoop—and then a baby's cry. Another mother's frustrated plea: "I know it's hard, but can you please try to keep the noise down?"

The first time it happened, I felt sick to my stomach. The second time, I bundled us into the car and drove home. I couldn't stand being at fault—being blamed for another's inconvenience and frustration. After the third time, I felt I could no longer visit my parents' home.

When I expressed my concerns, Mom told me not to worry, and Dad only shrugged.

"Babies get woken up early from their naps sometimes," he said. "That's just life."

So it was with great trepidation I knocked on their door one Saturday afternoon, unannounced.

My new baby (born a matter of days after my brother's) needed to nurse, and the three of us were out running errands. My parents' house was the most logical pit stop. They didn't answer the door, but I knew the code to the garage. So we pressed the buttons and tiptoed together into the living room. As we did, I said with hushed and disproportionate urgency, "We *have* to be quiet. Your cousin might be sleeping downstairs."

"Okay, Mom!" my four-year-old whispered, putting a finger to his lips and smiling good-naturedly.

He ran heavily across the room to the big cedar trunk full of toys, and I winced. "Hey, buddy. Try to walk. Okay? Running is too loud."

"Okay! Sorry!"

He started playing with the cars, but what started as sedated *vrooms* and little back-and-forth movements on the floor quickly escalated to unmufflered monster truck noises and joyful S-curves and leaps and heavy landings, the sound of the grippy rubber wheels and his boyish enthusiasm echoing through the quiet house. My stomach constricted. I thought, "We're going to wake the baby." I could feel a rising panic in my gut. Coming here had been a mistake, but I was already nursing. We had to see it through. We *had* to be quiet. *He* had to be quiet.

"Buddy, can you find something else to play with? Those are too loud."

He shrugged and settled cross-legged with a puzzle on the rug. He pushed the pieces around on the floor half-heartedly, then sighed. He looked at the drum in the corner with longing but did not play it. Instead, he wandered over to the kid easel, picked up a piece of yellow chalk, and began drawing big, irregular circles.

"Look, Mom. This is *so* quiet!"

"Wow, buddy. That *is* so quiet!"

He beamed and continued drawing circles. Then he picked up the plastic-backed eraser, scrubbed at the chalkboard, and dropped the eraser onto the floor. *Thunk*.

It wasn't a particularly loud sound, but at that point, any sound seemed loud to my hypervigilant ears.

"*Buddy! Please* try not to drop things on the wood floor. We *have* to be quiet. Okay?"

I could feel the anxiety welling in my throat, strangling my words, making me feel that the need for quiet was a matter of life and death. I knew I was being unreasonable, but I couldn't get control of the feeling that silence was imperative—that if we were not silent, the baby would wake, and the mother would be angry, and I would be to blame.

His shoulders drooped, his head hung low, and he spoke quietly to the floor. "I am a bad person. I shouldn't have dropped that."

The tightness in my stomach turned sour. "You're not a bad person, buddy!"

I wanted to get up and give him a hug, but I still had my second baby tucked in my arms.

"Yes, I am. I keep dropping things while the baby is sleeping. Why do I keep dropping things when the baby is sleeping? I'm a bad person."

"Honey, you are not a bad person."

He did not look up.

As I write this scene line by line, I feel ashamed. Even before I get to those softly spoken words, "I am a bad person," I feel uncomfortable watching the way I needled him and expected him to be somebody different for the convenience of others—to appease *my* anxiety. It is a worthy goal not to wake another person's baby. But I was so fixated, so afraid of making somebody angry, that I lost sight of my son—my beautiful little chaos machine, this boy who *loves* living.

I never heard a sound from the basement, never found out if they had been at home or whether the baby had been sleeping. And the truth is, it didn't matter who was downstairs or what they were doing. My son should have mattered more. And in that moment, something became suddenly, shockingly clear: My child is learning things from me that I do not intend. He is intuitive. He *infers.* He does not require my words to grasp my mindset, and this revelation came as a terrible blow.

I suppose I believed up until that moment that if I *did everything right,* if I read all the right books and said all the right things, I could parent him perfectly. I believed I could keep him from becoming like me, from inheriting my perfectionism, my conflict avoidance, my people-pleasing. But no. I was already giving him what I carried inside me. Because he loves me, trusts me, and exalts me, he had already begun internalizing my beliefs and making them his own.

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As we drove away from my parents' house that afternoon, I tried to reframe.

I said, "This was not about you. This was about me. Mommy was scared. Mommy made a mistake."

He said, "Okay, Mama," from his car seat, his feet dangling a full two feet off the floor.

Watching his beautiful baby-plump cheeks and long eyelashes in the rearview mirror, I felt hopeless. That he would grow up to feel relentless pressure and fear and guilt seemed inevitable; that it would be my fault seemed abundantly clear.

A few days later, sitting across from a grandmotherly therapist-turned-friend, I wept over my son's words: "I am a bad person."

"This is my fault," I told her. "I have done this to him with my high expectations and my worry and my conflict avoidance. I have failed my son. I am a bad mother."

She smiled at me gently, and I laughed at the irony of my words before she could even point it out. Here I was, stuck in the very same loop I wanted him to avoid, confirming to myself the very thing I wanted desperately for my son *not* to believe: *I am not allowed to make mistakes. I can and should be perfect.* My gut response to this irony was, perhaps unsurprisingly, to beat myself up for beating myself up.

She tried to pull me in a different direction. "Do you *really* believe you're a bad mother?"

I thought for a moment and answered honestly. "No."

"Hmm." She bobbed one leg up and down and said nothing.

"I'm a great mom." Somehow, I believed both things. Could both be true?

"Yes. I think you *are* a great mom. I think you're doing your best."

My eyes stung as my thoughts bubbled up into words. "But what if my best isn't good enough? What if he grows up thinking he's a *bad person* because of me?"

"Well, you're here, aren't you? You're trying?"

"Yes." I knew where she was going. Somehow, this was where we always ended up.

"So that's all anybody can really ask."

I nodded, but I didn't believe it.

"I wish I was somebody else," I said. "I wish I could be a different sort of person. I think he would be better off."

She smiled as if she saw something I couldn't. She said, "I don't know about that," and shrugged.

I have long misunderstood something fundamental about myself and the nature of living. I have long believed—due to a complex combination of family culture, religious education, and individual biology—that I must "be ye therefore perfect" (Matt. 5:48). Not in the long run, but today. Not through the grace of Christ, but through my own tenacity and virtue. I believe that I am bad when I do badly. That when I fall short, I am worth less.

Of course, this is not what the scriptures say. But when you have a tendency toward unrelentingly high personal standards and an outsize fear of judgment or disapproval, it's easy to become overwhelmed by words like these: "They shall be judged, every man according to his works, whether they be good, or whether they be evil. And if they be evil they are consigned to an awful view of their own guilt and abominations, which doth cause them to shrink from the presence of the Lord into a state of misery and endless torment, from whence they can no more return" (Mosiah 3:24–25).

It seems natural to read such a warning and grow to fear even the tiniest misstep.

Yet I know that waking a sleeping baby will not elicit misery and endless torment. I know that asking your child to be quieter than is reasonable probably doesn't count as an abomination, even if it makes him feel like a bad kid as a result. (I am 97 percent sure that's true.) Those words from the book of Mosiah were probably meant more for the people who rebel against goodness or shrug their shoulders at salvation—not the people who are trying very hard and still happen to be human. I understand this, but I don't always feel it in my gut.

Perhaps more importantly, this fixation on judgment and whether my works are "good enough" completely ignores the larger context for those ominous lines. The first twenty-three verses of that chapter in

Mosiah speak of the angel's "glad tidings of great joy" (Mosiah 3:3) that were declared to King Benjamin so that he and his people might "rejoice" and "be filled with joy" (3:13). Only in the last four verses does the Lord speak of "fire and brimstone" (3:27).

I believe those verses were never meant to be a message of crippling fear and guilt. They were a celebration of the beautiful, rare cosmic bliss of living—something my son seems to grasp so intuitively—because we live in a world where growth and change and repentance are possible through Christ. But for some reason, the misery and torment were the only things I seemed to remember.

I called my husband's sister a few days later, looking for more practical advice.

"What do I do?"

"It seems like he has a problematic mindset around mistakes," she ventured.

"I know. So how do I fix it?"

She told me about a parenting book she'd read, where the authors recommended responding positively to mistakes.

"But I've already been doing that," I said. "I try not to make a fuss when I screw something up. I just say, 'Oops, I made a mistake! That's okay! Everybody makes mistakes!'"

"Right, but they say you should talk about mistakes like they're a good thing. Like, 'Oh, this is awesome! I made a mistake! Now I get to learn something new!'"

This advice puzzled me. I had always tried to foster a "growth mindset" in my child. I encouraged him to try new things, to keep going when he confronted a challenge, and to pick himself back up when he fell. But suddenly there was a wall—a mental block. How could spilled milk or burned bagels be *awesome*? How could I possibly frame peeing your pants, drawing on the furniture, or hitting your baby brother as *wonderful* events rather than as setbacks to be recovered from?

I worried that if I was too relaxed about my child's mistakes, he would just make more of them.

I also worried that if I was too stern, too quick to correct or disapprove of my child's behavior, he would learn that *he* is bad when he does badly. That when he falls short, he is worth less.

As with so many things in parenting, I worried that no matter what I did, I'd be doing it wrong.

I didn't know if I could execute this new strategy, but with the words "I am a bad person" still reverberating in my spine, I was willing to try.

I started small. My four-year-old accidentally stuck both legs into one pant-leg, and despite the fact that we were running late for preschool, I said, "You're so lucky! You made a mistake! What did you learn?"

He smiled goofily. "I learned that two legs don't fit in here!"

He hopped around the room like a fish, then eventually pulled his legs out and tried again. We were late to preschool, but he had his pants on.

My four-year-old bumped a roll of toilet paper into the (as yet unflushed) toilet. Gingerly plucking it from the bowl, I took a breath and said, "You're so lucky! You made a mistake! What did you learn?"

He glanced up, cautious. "I learned . . . I should be more careful. What did *you* learn, Mom?"

"Hmm . . ." I thought for a moment. "Well, I learned that the toilet paper is easy to bump right there. Should we put it over here instead?"

He looked both surprised and impressed by my clever solution. "Yeah! That's a good idea, Mom." He skipped away, and I felt something balloon inside me—something like hope.

My four-year-old came barreling around a corner with a long, pointy stick and jabbed me in the side. I groaned, "Wow, *you're so lucky!* You made a mistake! What did you learn?"

He looked ponderously at the stick, scratching his chin.

"I learned this stick can hurt people." And then, his brown eyes turned up toward mine. "Are you okay, Mommy? Maybe this is not a good inside-the-house stick."

"Maybe not," I agreed.

I said it over and over. "You're so lucky! You made a mistake!" I didn't believe what I was saying, but I wanted to. I hoped that might be good enough. I hoped that the words from the book of Alma might apply in this case too. "Yea, even if ye can no more than desire to believe, let this desire work in you, even until ye believe" (Alma 32:27).

Several months after the incident in my parents' living room, my four-year-old spilled an immense cup of juice. The puddle of orange liquid was surrounded by a circular firework of splatter marks across the floor.

I grabbed a couple dish cloths and said reflexively, "You're so lucky! You made a mistake!" as we started mopping up the mess together. But

then, suddenly, something clicked into place inside me. I was looking at all those orange speckles dotting the white table legs, and I *believed* what I was saying.

"We *are* lucky that we make mistakes, buddy!" I repeated.

He was humming to himself, but I kept going because saying it out loud felt important.

"Mistakes mean we're *people*! We're lucky because we still have things to learn and ways to grow. Otherwise, what's the point of being here?"

"I don't know." He shrugged and took a big bite of PB&J.

"The mistakes make us human, honey. And being human is a wonderful thing. That's why we're lucky."

I knew he didn't get it, but for that one little moment, I did. I *believed*.

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These days, I can't always access that epiphany, but it's inside of me somewhere. When I start to feel the guilt or the dread, I remind myself that I am not a perfect mother, but I am a good one. I am lucky that I make mistakes because it makes me human. I think, "Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief" (Mark 9:24).

To be honest, I don't know whether I'm doing it "right." More and more, I think that "right" doesn't exist but "good enough" does. For now, I am trying to convince both of us that mistakes are not just fixable but wonderful. I am trying to love myself, and I am trying to embrace the beautiful, rare cosmic bliss of living an *imperfect* life.

At bedtime last night, out of the blue, my four-year-old said, "Mom, I love you one hundred, *two hundred*!" Then, without skipping a beat, he added, "And I love *myself* one hundred, *two hundred* too!"

For now, I count that as progress.

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