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Transitional Characters

BY SUSAN E. MURRAY

For I know the plans that I have for you, declares the LORD, plans for welfare and not for calamity to give you a future and a hope. —Jeremiah 29:11 NAS

Logic tells me that the family should be the safest place on Earth for its members. Reality tells me that isn't necessarily so. Too many of us grew up in families where we didn't feel safe — emotionally, physically or spiritually. However, just because we grew up in an environment that was difficult doesn't mean we have to bleed that into the future. We can choose to be a transitional character.

I first heard of this concept from Carlfred Broderick, a renowned marriage and family scholar at the University of Southern California. We were in Australia, presenting at the same conference. His story provided an "Aha!" moment for me. Carlfred was a transitional character. My husband's father was a transitional character. I began to identify with being a transitional character myself and became more committed to my own personal journey, knowing I had reason to celebrate where the Lord was leading me. Jeremiah's picture of God took on added meaning.

Carlfred defined a transitional character as "one who, in a single generation, changes the entire course of a lineage. The changes might be for good or ill, but the most noteworthy examples are those individuals who grow up in an abusive, emotionally destructive environment and who somehow find a way to metabolize the poison and refuse to pass it on to their children. They break the mold. Their contribution to humanity is to filter the destructiveness out of their own lineage so that the generations downstream will have a supportive foundation upon which to build productive lives."¹

How can one be a transitional character?

Acknowledge and accept how ongoing, negative family interactions have impacted your life.

Develop a vision of yourself as a transitional character. Seeing yourself successfully changing these patterns can help you keep focused on your goal.

Build supportive relationships with other healthy adults. Life-altering changes are difficult to make alone. For example, one dad found he tended to react with

anger to the demanding cries of his toddler son. He also found himself being too physically harsh. In talking with his wife, he realized he was treating his son as his older brothers had treated him. This awareness, through a supportive relationship, was crucial to his becoming more patient and gentle with his son, reversing the pattern modeled in his family of origin.

Develop a plan of what you want to change and how you will go about it. You don't have to do this all on your own; seek out a mentor or counselor.

Celebrate the good and positive things you learned in your family. You would not have survived if it had been all bad.

Create a healthy emotional distance from those who continue to perpetuate unhealthy interactions in your family.

Allow yourself time to practice and establish healthy behavior patterns before marriage. If already married, work together to learn and grow in this area.

Establish and celebrate family rituals that provide a sense of unity and constancy to your current family unit. To be most effective, these rituals need to be observed even when family times are tough.

See yourself as a life-long learner. A good education teaches you to think clearly and make wise choices. The more you know about what makes a healthy family the better.

God keeps His promises. You, too, can claim the promise of Jeremiah 29:11!

Susan Murray is a professor emerita of behavioral sciences at Andrews University, and she is a certified family life educator and licensed marriage and family therapist.

1. Broderick, Carlfred B., *Marriage and the Family*, Prentice Hall: Upper Saddle River, N. Jersey. (1988), p. 14.

