

# PUBERTY, POPCORN,

Robert I. Craig

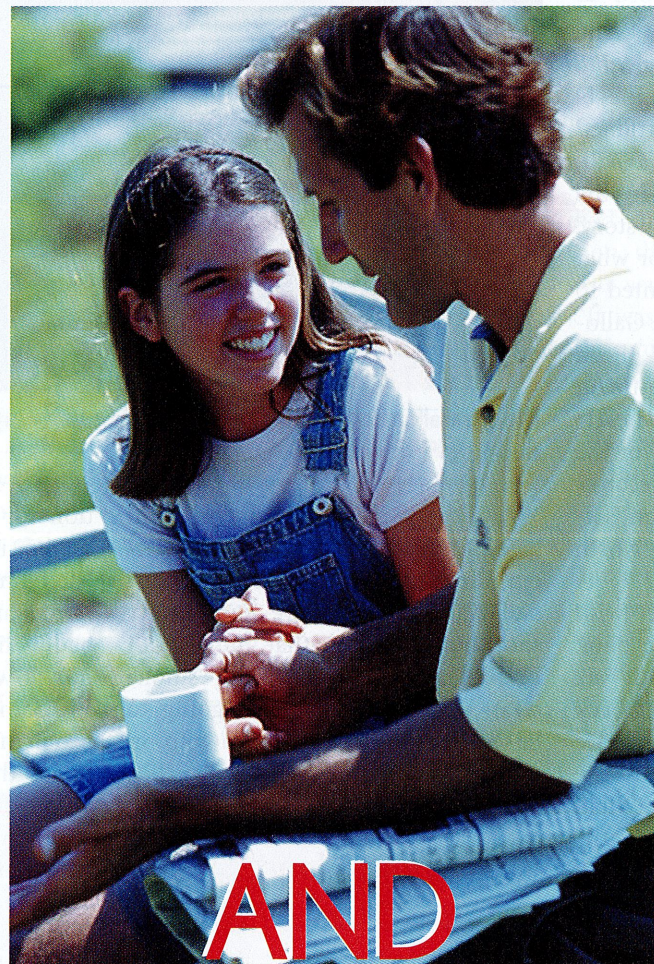
**M**y friend, a proud agnostic, has never had it so good. And I can't wait to tell him so.

He says the Bible contains some great life lessons—and a lot of entertaining stories. But he maintains that they are only that: stories along the lines of those told by Aesop and the Brothers Grimm, with a spoonful of superstition thrown in. He'll concede that there may have been, for example, somebody called Moses long ago and far away. But this stuff about the burning bush and God's working through Moses?

"Nah," he'd say. "That's more fantasy than fact. When I want warm fuzzies I watch a Disney movie."

This friend and I both have twelve-year-old daughters. We swap stories about being fathers and how hard—and crazy and heartwarming and gut wrenching—parenting can often be. My daughter goes to a Catholic school, his to a public school. My daughter was recently studying the story of Moses and the burning bush in the Book of Genesis. His knows about Moses and the burning bush because she owns the video *The Prince of Egypt*.

My friend loves *The Prince of Egypt*, "fantasy" notwithstanding. He loves the part when Moses tells God he's not cut out for delivering people.



tience and yells so loudly that the volume sends Moses flying. "Reminds me of my dad," my friend told me.

I know this part. It's my favorite part too, not because of all the yelling, but because of what happens immediately afterward when all the yelling is done. God's voice turns soft, and he lifts up Moses, hugs him, and tells him, "I'll be with you and help you and love you."

**M**y friend's daughter and my daughter have entered puberty. My friend and I laugh—if we don't laugh, we'll cry—about how unpredictable our daughters' behavior can sometimes be. "It's either puberty," my friend says, "or the girl is manic-depressive."

This week my friend and I were talking on the phone. He told me that his daughter had appeared for breakfast in one of her moods. Usually she gives my friend a good-morning hug. That morning she had pushed him away. When her little sister said good morning, she'd said, "Shut up, dummy!" The family had eaten their breakfast in silence.

When breakfast was over, she had gotten up to leave. My friend had asked her what was wrong. She'd said, "Nothing." He'd asked again, and his daughter had snapped, "What do you want from me?" My friend

had bitten the inside of his cheek, then said he only wanted to help. And then it had all come out: her hair was stupid, she hated cafeteria food, and she was nervous about an upcoming test. My friend had told her that things weren't as bad as she thought, that her hair looked great, she could bring her own lunch, and she shouldn't worry because she'd been studying for this test all along. She hadn't been convinced. Back and forth they'd gone. Finally she'd said, "You just don't get it!"

My friend had wanted to tell her that *she* was about to get it. Instead, he had found the strength to try once more. "Try putting your hair in a ponytail," he'd suggested. "While you're doing that I'll pack your lunch for you. And as for the test, if we both hurry up, I can quiz you before you leave."

"No!"

"You'll be fine. We'll do it together—"

"LEAVE ME ALONE!"

**D**escribing what had happened next was hard for my friend. His voice cracked as he described the conflict in his heart between love and being human. "I swore I'd never yell like my dad did," he said. "But here I was, suddenly doing the same thing!"

He turned quiet for a moment. He seemed afraid to speak, as if he might

reveal a part of himself that men aren't supposed to show. I asked him quietly, "What did you do next?"

He took a slow, deep, cleansing breath, and when he spoke again, I heard something vaguely familiar: a tenderness that since I became a father I have felt is common only among men who love their children deeply. I could hear that tenderness, that note, that tone, in my friend's

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voice as he told me how, once the yelling was over, he had reached for his daughter's hand, which she was slow to give, then surrender. He had pulled her close, hugging her and whispering, "I'm sorry, sweetheart. Please forgive me. I was wrong to yell like that." And he told me, his voice cracking again, "If only my dad had done that!"

We hung up, and I came to a decision: I'm going to tell him. It's time.

Enough of this belief that the Bible is no different from Aesop and the

Brothers Grimm. Enough of this agnostic nonsense.

I'm going to tell him where his strength to love originates, a strength powerful enough to make men keep trying, to make people break patterns ingrained in them since they were small children, to make a man ask his own child for forgiveness. Yes, it's time I tell him. But I won't use words. I'm going to buy *The Prince of Egypt*.

I'll invite my friend and his daughter over. I'll make popcorn, and my friend, his daughter, my daughter, and I will watch the movie together. And this time when my friend sees his favorite part, he'll recognize his own love when God's voice turns soft and he embraces Moses, his child. The fire of realization will ignite in my friend's heart, and he'll know whence springs the love of a father for his child. That the bush burned long ago and far away, he might maintain, but he'll swear that love like this is no fairy tale.

I'll have a box of tissues ready. My friend is going to need it. I know he will, because I'll need it too as we sit there and watch and munch and realize that we—both of us—have never had it so good. ■

*Robert I. Craig, a freelance writer, is the stay-at-home father of two girls. He and his wife and daughters live in Hudson, Ohio.*

# AND PATERNAL LOVE

God says he most certainly is. Moses keeps saying that he is not, that he doesn't have what it takes to be a leader. God tells him he can bring his brother along to help him. The two of them go back and forth until God suddenly seems to run out of pa-

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