

Scars of Hospitality

Beyond a friendly greeting and an open door, Christ's call to welcome others often involves a painful cost. | DEVYN CHAMBERS JOHNSON

In the summer of 2010 I quit my job. It was a good job with a fancy title and good benefits, but I was miserable. The job was meant to be a placeholder while I looked for a ministry position or until we started a family. Both options eluded us. So I quit. I'm sure coworkers assumed I was pregnant, but most people just thought I was crazy. The new plan was for me to be creative, provide more pulpit supply, volunteer, and find ways to be reminded that God still had a call on my life.

Ten days later, with all my craft projects still waiting to be conquered, my husband, Ryan, and I got a phone call from a social worker. Nearly a year earlier we had signed up for a volunteer program in Chicago called Safe Families, which provides temporary care to children while families are in crisis. Their objective is to protect children and support parents so that families can be strengthened and reunited. Safe Families and their volunteer families have cared for thousands of children in Chicago and even more throughout the country. They keep children safe and out of the state system unless situations of abuse and neglect warrant the state's involvement.

Up until this point we had had

one brief placement—a fifteen-year-old boy who came to us dejected and deflated. By the time he left three short weeks later he was smiling, laughing, pushing the occasional boundary, and twenty pounds heavier. But this call was different. Our social worker had heard that I had quit my job and wanted to know if we would care for an eight-month-old baby girl for one week.

There were noble reasons for saying yes but deep down I just wanted to love a baby—even if it was only for a week. Ryan, who was serving as a youth pastor and much more comfortable with any age but an infant, was a bit more skeptical—with good reason. Most people have months to prepare for a baby and we had forty-five minutes.


Ryan and I met as students at North Park Theological Seminary and quickly found a common passion for hospitality—or at least what we thought was hospitality. We both came from families whose home was a revolving door of company, friends, and family. We had similar hopes for our home so we signed up for Safe Families and we brought home Baby E.

We had rightly assumed that hospitality, as the dictionary puts it, is the

friendly reception and treatment of guests or strangers. What we learned the hard way is that God's call to hospitality is far more than friendly reception and treatment—it is far more than a dinner party and a comfortable guest room. We thought we knew hospitality—but it demanded so much more of us than we could have ever imagined. We learned that God's call to hospitality makes us vulnerable. God's call to hospitality leaves scars.

Baby E's first week with us was both a great success and a comedy of errors. Her joy and good nature were contagious and—most amazingly—she slept through the night from day one. After one week it became apparent that her mother was not going to be ready to care for her for some time. Our social worker offered to find another home if, for any reason, we were unable to continue to care for Baby E.

Ryan and I had a long conversation that night. As people who desperately longed to be parents we were entering dangerous territory. Baby E could not be ours and, could we, after another week or two—or longer—say goodbye? After infertility could we survive this guaranteed loss as well? Were we ready for this type of hospitality?



**As people who
desperately longed
to be parents
we were entering
dangerous territory.**

To tell you the truth, we weren't sure. But I did know that I could not imagine making her transition to another family to protect my own heart. We felt reckless with our own feelings, and we knew that we would take a hit. We didn't know the when and the where and the how, but we knew that our already tender hearts would suffer.

And we were right.

Baby E stayed five weeks the first time. When we said goodbye I was almost certain we would never see her again. Her mother loved her and I knew she would do her very best, but honestly, her best was barely sufficient. I constantly worried about her.

Then I got a text—a wonderfully friendly text. Then there was a phone

call. Then Baby E came for a visit. Then another and another. Then they both spent Christmas Eve with us. We became a cross between grandparents and aunt/uncle. And I started to relax. Maybe they would be okay. Maybe Baby E would continue to thrive despite the young mother's struggles.

Then it all fell apart.

There are far too many sleepless nights and twists and turns to chronicle here. Suffice to say our hospitality turned not only painful—it had limits. We had no legal relationship to Baby E. We had no recourse and no rights. I had nothing concrete to give to the state's child services. I just knew something was terribly wrong.

So we prayed and we waited.

Then we got another call. This time

from child services. Our prayers had been answered: somebody, somewhere made a call. With no family to turn to, Baby E's mother named us next of kin and we brought her home again. This time she was fourteen months old and greeted our home like she had never left. She felt safe and she slept, recovering from stress and chaos that we knew little about.

But the clock was ticking. As long as Baby E was safe with us, child services would not open a case against

Devyn Chambers Johnson and her husband, Ryan, are co-pastors of Community Covenant Church in Springfield, Virginia. They are currently in the domestic infant adoption process. Devyn blogs about their adoption journey at babychambers-johnson.wordpress.com. For more information on the Safe Families program, go to their website at www.safe-families.org.

the mother, but we were moving out of state in six short weeks to accept a new pastoral call. With the realization that she was in over her head and the strong desire to have the best for Baby E, the mother made the bold choice of adoption.

We didn't know what to think or hope. Would she choose us? Would God turn these months of messy hospitality and worry into a most glorious happy ending? Would the baby girl that we knew would never be ours actually become our daughter?

For nearly the entire six weeks her mother agonized over the decision. She could choose to have Baby E stay with us, a family she knew but who were moving out of state, or she could choose a local family who would agree to an open adoption and frequent visits. It was a difficult decision for the mother—on top of an already difficult decision of adoption.

She chose the local family.

And this is the hit my heart took that I never anticipated. I anticipated worry, I anticipated missing Baby E, I anticipated saying goodbye, I even anticipated making hard decisions like calling child services. But I didn't anticipate this.

I didn't anticipate going through all the motions of putting Baby E up for adoption.

While the mother signed all the papers, we did most of the work. We visited social worker upon social worker, there were doctor visits, adoption counselors, birth parent counselors. We had forms to fill out—not official legal forms but forms outlining her bedtime routine, what she liked to eat and do. Had she met developmental milestones? Were her attachments healthy? What size clothes did she wear? This was all put in a file and made available to prospective parents.

The adoptive parents her birth mother chose are wonderful. They are loving, gracious, and intelligent people. The week before we moved—leaving Chicago for our new home

and church in Virginia—we began to transition Baby E to her new family. So the chosen couple, ecstatic after their long wait to become parents, came to our house. They came to the house of a couple that not only longed to have children but loved the baby in their care. And while they attempted to temper their joy we attempted to hold back tears as we bombarded them with information about Baby E.

She loves her stuffed puppy, she likes her hair to be stroked when she's sleepy, she loves music and animals and books. She's all smiles when she wakes up. She loves people and food and bath time. She will steal your heart.

Then two days later we packed up all her clothes and toys and drove her to her new home. Her new parents welcomed us in and we enjoyed dinner together—pizza. Then Baby E started getting sleepy and she saw all her things in the living room and she fell apart. This little girl who never had trouble with babysitters, daycare, or church nursery knew that we were leaving her. And my heart broke.

We stood aside as her new parents frantically tried to console her and distract her. I knew that if I just held her she'd stop crying, but she wasn't ours to hold any longer. They eventually distracted her with the promise of a bath. When her tears were dry we kissed her forehead, I whispered a prayer in her ear, and we left.

For months while we unpacked our boxes in Virginia we found blocks and toys that she had stashed in the midst of my packing. I have lain awake many nights remembering her and missing her. But thanks be to God I no longer lie awake worrying about her. Though she is not with us—she is safe and she is loved.

We recently marked the one-year anniversary of our goodbye and had the unbelievable privilege of being welcomed back into the home of her parents for a visit. They made pizza again—a touching reminder of our

history and unique relationship. Baby E is no longer a baby. She is a happy, healthy, and absolutely adored little girl. Praise be to God.

And we still have occasional contact with the birth mother. She is able to see Baby E occasionally and treasures those times.

As I remember Baby E, I have many pictures. I even have a few toys and outfits that I couldn't bear to part with. But mostly I have scars—what I have learned to embrace as the scars of hospitality. God's call to vulnerability and hospitality is not just messy, it can be painful—but it also can be beautiful.

I'm glad I have scars. I think they are beautiful. Not because they are war wounds I can tout but because they remind me of Baby E. And also because they remind me how much I am loved.

Before Baby E came to our house I felt forgotten by God. I was angry. I worried that God had changed his mind about me—that my call to be a pastor was rescinded. And my desire to be a mother seemed to fall on deaf ears.

But Baby E brought out the mother in me, the pastor in me, and the fighter in me. And I couldn't help but remember “how much more.” If I, in my brokenness and humanness, can love and care and fight for Baby E, how much more so does God love me and care for me and fight for me.

And he bears scars as well. God's great act of love and hospitality left scars. He sent his Son—a Son who suffered and died and whose resurrected body still bears scars (John 20:20). Christ bears scars of hospitality because “God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8).

God's great act of love, hospitality, and redemption has a happy ending—Easter, resurrection, redemption, and life everlasting. But his love for us left scars. Beautiful scars. Scars of hospitality. ■