

# Age *of* Opportunity

A Biblical Guide  
to Parenting Teens

PAUL DAVID TRIPP

**R&R**  
P U B L I S H I N G  
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## PREFACE

IT was in August of 1971 that I took my first pastoral position as the Youth Director of Whaley Street United Methodist Church in Columbia, South Carolina. I was three months away from my twenty-first birthday. Those days at Whaley Street seem so distant, almost like part of someone else's life. Yet there is one thing that remains with me: a desire to see the Gospel applied to those difficult years when a person passes from childhood into adulthood.

I couldn't have written this book in 1971. In many ways I was one of the youth that I am writing about here. But more than that, there was much work that God needed to do in me through many people that he would raise up. It would be impossible to list all the people who have contributed to the thinking that is reflected here. This book represents the loving ministry of pastors, teachers, friends, fellow elders, and family; all who have contributed to my understanding of what it means to live biblically.

I would like to thank some people who have been significant contributors to my life, my ministry, and this book. First my children, Justin (9/76), Ethan (9/78), Nicole (9/81), and Darnay (10/85). You have given me room to learn and taught me so much about what it means to parent God's way. Thank you for the gift of forgiveness you

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have given me again and again. Thank you for helping me to see that the teen years are really years of huge opportunity. Thank you also for not accusing me of loving my laptop more than I loved you as I spent those many nights in the bedroom typing away. Finally, thanks for letting me tell the stories of our struggles. They help give this book integrity.

Tedd, I am sure that you have no idea how much you have mentored me over the years. I seldom teach without your name coming up in an illustration or a quote. Thanks for encouraging me to write this book.

Ed, Dave, and John (faculty members at the Christian Counseling and Educational Foundation), thank you for helping me take scriptural theology and make it work where the rubber meets the road. Thanks, too, for your continuing influence as we minister together.

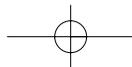
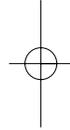
Sue, I cannot thank you enough for the hours of editorial work that have simply made this a much better book. Your ability to capture my thoughts with an economy and clarity of words is greatly appreciated.

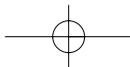
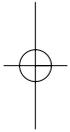
Ruth, thank you for the many hours of transcription. Your willing labor gave me the “jump start” I needed.

Jayne, thank you for being committed to making the things that have been planned actually happen. This book is one of the fruits of that commitment.

My prayer is that this book would give hope, courage, and insight to thousands of parents who are entering or are in the midst of the teen years with their children. May the truths of God’s Word turn a time of anxious survival into a time of expectation and opportunity!

PART ONE *Clearing  
the Debris*





# CHAPTER 1

## AGE OF OPPORTUNITY OR SEASON FOR SURVIVAL?

IT is everywhere around us—on the television sitcom, in the magazine on the supermarket rack, on the shelves of the local bookstore, on television and radio talk shows, and yes, even in a number of Christian books on the family. Parents are afraid of their teenagers. Even as they are enjoying the early years of a child's life, they are looking over their shoulders with dread, expecting the worst, knowing that in a few short years this precious little one will turn into a monster overnight. They've heard enough stories from parents who have gone through the dark valley of the teen years to know the dangers that lie ahead. They are told to expect the worst and to be thankful if they come out of the valley sane, with their teenager alive and their family intact.

I encountered this view of the teen years recently at a marriage conference. It had been a great weekend in all ways. The teaching had been engaging, convicting, and encouraging. The food and accommodations had been superb, and the conference had been held in a beautiful seaside location. Near the end of the weekend, I was looking out at the sun glistening on the waters of

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the bay when I noticed a couple sitting nearby. They looked very unhappy.

I was curious, so I asked them if they had enjoyed the weekend. Everything had been great, they replied. I commented that they didn't look very happy. The women responded, "We have two teenagers and we are dreading going home. We wish this weekend would last forever!" "You just have to expect your teenager to be rebellious; all of us were," her husband added. "You just have to ride it out." "Besides," she moaned, "you can't argue with hormones!"

I walked away impressed that something is fundamentally wrong with the way we think about this time in a child's life. Something is inherently wrong with the cultural epidemic of fear and cynicism about our teenagers. Something is wrong when a parent's highest goal is survival. We need to take another look: Is this a biblical view of this period in a child's life? Does this view lead to biblical strategies of parenting and biblical hope?

We need to examine what is wrong with the cynicism about teenagers that is endemic in our culture.

### ***A Biological View of Teens***

We often talk about our teenagers as if they were nothing more than collections of raging, rebel hormones encased in developing skin. We see our goal as somehow holding these hormones back so that we can survive until the teen has reached twenty. A parent recently rejoiced to me that her son had turned twenty, as if he had passed through some magic portal from danger into safety. "We made it!" she said.

This survival mentality exposes the poverty of this view of teenagers. Many parents who talk to me about their teenagers talk without hope; they see them as victims of hormones that drive them to do crazy things. Although they would never say this, the working

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theology that hides behind this view is that the truths of Scripture, the power of the Gospel, biblical communication, and godly relationship are no match for the teen years. Yes, we believe that God's Word is powerful and effective—except if some poor soul is trying to apply it to a child between the years of thirteen and nineteen! We now even have a category of children called “pre-teen.” These are the years when the monsterish characteristics of the teenagers begin to develop and rear their ugly heads.

Are we comfortable with a view of teenagers that says that because of the significant biological changes going on inside them, they are essentially unreachable? Are we comfortable with a hormonal view of teens that reduces them to victims of biological forces, freeing them from responsibility for their own choices and actions? Do we really want a view of teens that would have us believe that the truths that give life and hope to anyone who believes cannot reach a teenager? We cannot hold onto a robust belief in the power of the Gospel if we continue to buy into our culture's cynicism about the teen years.

***Particular Sacrifice and Suffering?***

In 2 Timothy 2:22, Paul exhorts Timothy to “flee the evil desires [lusts] of youth.” This interesting little phrase calls us to be balanced in the way we think about teenagers and the way we define this time of life. On the one hand, the Bible challenges us not to be naive about this period of life. There are lusts that uniquely plague young people, temptations that are particularly powerful. These must be faced. Scripture enjoins us to be strategic, to ask the question, “What are the evil desires that grip a person during this phase of life?”

At the same time Paul uses the qualifier, “youthful,” because each phase of life has its own set of temptations. The temptations of the little boy, the young man, and the old man are not identical. The temptations of the teenager are not particularly savage and severe. Each

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person at each time in his life, if he seeks to please the Lord, must watch, pray, stand fast, and fight lest he fall into temptation. The teenager is called to guard against the temptations that are unique to youth, while the older person is called to guard against the temptations unique to that age. Each person, whatever his or her age, must accept each stage of warfare as a Christian living in this fallen world.

### ***Battle of Biology or Battle of the Heart?***

The 2 Timothy passage is also helpful in the way it locates and defines the battle of youth. There *is* a battle raging in the lives of young people, but it is not the battle of biology. It is an intensely spiritual battle, a battle for the heart. This is exactly what Paul wants us to be aware of as he exhorts Timothy not to let his heart be controlled by evil desires. This battle is not unique to teens. It takes a certain shape during the teen years, but it is the battle of every sinner.

The tendency of every sinner, no matter what his age, is captured well by Paul in Romans 1:25, that is, the tendency to exchange worship and service of the Creator for the worship and service of the created thing. Yes, it's there in the life of the teenager who forsakes his convictions for the approval of his peers, but it is just as powerfully present in the adult who compromises family and spiritual priorities for professional success. The battle, as Paul understands it, is a heart battle, and it is dramatically important because what controls the heart will direct the life.

There are significant temptations of the heart that greet teenagers, calling them to believe that they cannot live without some aspect of the creation. These voices call them to believe that identity, meaning, and purpose can be found in the creature rather than the Creator. These are the life-altering conflicts of the teen years. We dare not miss them because of our biologically oriented fears and our survival mentality. We must believe that Jesus came so that each of us would

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be freed from the desires of our sinful nature so that we may serve him and him alone. This includes our teenagers.

***The Struggles of Parents***

The tumult of the teen years is not only about the attitudes and actions of teens, but the thoughts, desires, attitudes, and actions of parents as well. The teen years are hard for us because they tend to bring out the worst in us. It is in these years that parents hear themselves saying things that they never thought they would say. Parents find themselves reacting with accusations, guilt manipulation, and ultimatums, responding with a level of anger that they would not have thought possible. It is in these years that parents struggle with embarrassment at being related to the teen who was once, as a child, a great source of pride and joy.

It is vital for us to confess that the struggle of the teen years is not only about teen biology and teen rebellion. These years are hard for us because they expose the wrong thoughts and desires of our *own* hearts. There is a principle here that we need to recognize. My mother put it this way: "There is nothing that comes out of a drunk that was not in there in the beginning." These years are hard for us because they rip back the curtain and expose us. This is why trials are so difficult, yet so useful in God's hands. We don't radically change in a moment of trial. No, trials expose what we have always been. Trials bare things to which we would have otherwise been blind. So, too, the teen years expose our self-righteousness, our impatience, our unforgiving spirit, our lack of servant love, the weakness of our faith, and our craving for comfort and ease.

***Why We Miss the Opportunities***

I sat recently in my office with a father who was so angry at his son that it was all he could do to be civil. He did not see the tremendous

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spiritual needs in his son that he had been uniquely positioned by God to meet. There was no tenderness in their relationship; there wasn't even cordiality. There was tense distance. At one point the father rose to speak to his son about his report card. He walked to his son's chair and stuck the failing report card in his face and said, "How dare you do this to me after all I have done for you!" To him, the bad grades were a personal affront. This was not the way he thought it was supposed to work. He had done his job; now the son was supposed to do his. He was angry at his son, but not because of his sin against God. He was angry because his son had taken things away from *him* as a father that he valued very much: his reputation as a successful Christian father, the respect he thought he deserved, and the ease he thought he would finally achieve with older children.

There was no attitude of ministry, no sense of opportunity, no quest to be part of what God was doing in the life of his son. Instead, he was filled with the anger described in James 4:2: "You want something, but you don't get it."

The cultural cynicism we have been discussing is based on who we think teenagers are and what we think they are going through. We tend to believe that there is little we can do to make these years more productive. Rather, the culture would say, we need to come up with positive strategies of survival that preserve the sanity of the parents and the stability of the marriage, and that keep the teenager out of as much self-inflicted danger as possible.

However, it is my experience that when parents begin to recognize, own, confess, and turn from their own wrong heart attitudes and the wrong actions that flow from them, the result is a marked difference in their relationship to their teen and in the way they view the struggles of the teen years. When we look with concerned eyes toward the teen years, we need to look not only at our children, but also at our-

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selves. Parents who are humbly willing to change, position themselves to be God's instruments of change.

***A Better Way***

It is time for us to reject the wholesale cynicism of our culture regarding adolescence. Rather than years of undirected and unproductive struggle, these are years of unprecedented opportunity. They are the golden age of parenting, when you begin to reap all the seeds you have sown in their lives, when you can help your teenager to internalize truth, preparing him or her for a productive, God-honoring life as an adult.

These are the years of penetrating questions, the years of wonderful discussions never before possible. These are the years of failure and struggle that put the teen's true heart on the table. These are the years of daily ministry and of great opportunity.

These are not years merely to be survived! They are to be approached with a sense of hope and a sense of mission. Almost every day brings a new opportunity to enter the life of your teen with help, hope, and truth. We should not resign ourselves to an increasingly distant relationship. This is the time to connect with our children as never before. These are years of great opportunity.

That is what this book is about. It is a book of opportunity and hope. It is time for us to come out of the bunkers of cynicism and fear and into the light, examining the plan God has for us as we parent our teenagers. This is a book about activity, goals, and practical strategies. This is a book that believes that the truths of Scripture apply as powerfully to teens as they do to anyone else.

At the same time, this book will not be naive. The teen years are often cataclysmic years of conflict, struggle, and grief. They are years of new temptations, of trial and testing. Yet these very struggles, con-

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flicts, trials, and tests are what produce such wonderful parental opportunities.

### ***Recognizing God's Moments of Change***

It was a wintry Tuesday night. I had had counseling appointments all day and had taught for three hours in the evening. I was driving home at about ten o'clock, dreaming about an hour or so of relaxation before I hit the bed. I silently hoped that for some inexplicable reason, the whole family had gone to sleep at nine o'clock. Or if they had not gone to bed, I hoped that they would instinctively know that I was tired and not to be disturbed. I reasoned that I had served God faithfully that day. Surely, God would agree that I had the right to punch out from life! I dreamed of an empty family room, a well-iced Diet Coke, the newspaper, and the remote control. I was totally exhausted and I had a right to relax. (You can see that I was approaching the house with a selfless attitude of ministry!)

I quietly opened the door in the vain hope that I could sneak in unnoticed. The living room lights were out and the house was quiet. I was filled with hope. Maybe my dreams had come true; an evening of relaxation all to myself! I had only put one foot in the door when I heard an angry voice. My heart sank! I wanted to act as if I hadn't heard it. It was the voice of Ethan, my teenage son. My disappointment soon gave way to anger. I wanted to grab him and say, "Don't you know what my day has been like? Don't you know how tired I am? The last thing I need right now is to deal with your problems. You're going to have to solve this one yourself. I wish for once you'd think of somebody besides yourself. I do and do for you and this is the thanks I get. You can't leave me alone one night?"

All these thoughts raged within me, but I didn't say a word. I listened to Ethan as he poured out his complaint. He was as angry as

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he had ever been at his older brother. He was cursing the fact that he had an older brother who seemed to do nothing but “trash his life.” It was after ten. The issue that started this thing was petty. I was tempted to tell him to get a grip and deal with it, but another agenda gripped me. Here was one of those unexpected moments of opportunity, one of those mundane moments ordained by a loving and sovereign God where the heart of my teenager was being exposed. It was more than an Ethan and Dad moment. This was God’s moment, a dynamic moment of redemption where God was continuing the work of rescue he had begun years ago in my son. The only question in the moment was whether I would pursue God’s agenda or my own. Would I believe the Gospel in that moment, trusting God to give me what I needed so that I could do what he was calling me to do in the life of my son?

I asked Ethan to sit down at the dining room table and tell me what was going on. He was hurt and angry. His heart was on the table. We talked through his anger and he became ready to listen. A petty argument with his brother opened the door to discussing things that were far from petty. God gave me strength and patience. He filled my mouth with the right things to say. Ethan saw himself in new ways that night and confessed to things that he had never before recognized.

It was approaching midnight when I said goodnight to Ethan. We hugged and went to bed. What first appeared to be an irritating moment over an obviously petty issue had in fact been a wonderful opportunity of ministry, ordained by a God of love. It became very clear that God wasn’t only working to change Ethan; he was working to change me as well. The selfishness of *my* heart had been revealed that evening, the same selfishness that causes parents to lash out in anger at the very teens who need them. My need of Christ, too, had been ex-

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posed. There was no way I could function as his instrument without his strength.

### ***Little Moments, High Calling***

I chose to write about this moment because it was one of those unremarkable moments that not only happen daily, but many times a day. Each of these moments is loaded with opportunity. There are many, many more of these moments than the dramatic moments of adolescence—like pregnancy, drugs, and violence—that get so much press. None of us lives constantly in the grand moments of significant decision; there aren't many of them in life. No, we live in the world of the incredibly mundane. This is where we need to see our teenagers with the eyes of opportunity rather than eyes of dread and fear.

The argument over the last pop tart, the cry of nothing to wear a half hour before school, the report card crumpled in the pocket of jeans heading for the wash, the pouting expression in the face of a parent's "No," the third fender-bender in a month, the constant words of discontent, the "everybody else does," and the "I'm the only one whose parents make them . . ." all must be seen as something more than hassles that get in the way of an otherwise enjoyable life. These are the moments God made parents for. You are God's agents on the watch. You have been given an incredibly high calling. You are God's instrument of help and preparation as this child makes his final steps out of the home and into God's world. These moments make your life worthwhile. Here you will make a contribution that is worth infinitely more than any career or financial accomplishment.

### ***Recognizing the Opportunities***

The more I have lived with my own teenage children, watched their peers, and interacted with other parents of teenagers, the more

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I am convinced that this is a time of unbridled opportunity. There are issues that get exposed in this delicate, scary, awkward, and volatile period of development that make it so full of opportunity. It is not a time to head for the bunkers! It is not a time to dread worst-case scenarios of total domestic chaos. This is not a time to accept a culturally dictated “generation gap.” This is a time to jump into the battle and move toward your teenager. It is a time for engagement, interaction, discussion, and committed relationship. This is not a time to let a teenager hide his doubts, fears, and failures, but a time to pursue, love, encourage, teach, forgive, confess, and accept. It is a wonderful time.

As I write this, my wife and I have three teenagers. We have never had more of a sense of calling. We have laughed, cried, discussed, and prayed with our teens. We have struggled for them and with them. We have seen failure and trial as opportunity. We have not always responded in faith, and we have needed to confess our own sin, but we have commented to one another that this is a wonderful period of family life. We are so happy to be doing what we are doing. We see the glory of God being revealed even in the midst of our own feeble efforts and weak faith.

There are three fundamental doors of opportunity that every teenage parent can walk through. Each of these problems becomes a means of helping the teenager to internalize the truths to which he has been exposed for years. The problems of teenage insecurity, teenage rebellion, and the teenager’s widening world are actually God’s doors of opportunity where parents have unique access to the central issues in their teenagers’ lives.

***Teenage Insecurity***

Teenagers are not secure people! The teenager who seems secure at breakfast can easily fall apart by supper. The teenager who goes to

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bed thinking she looks okay, awakes, looks in the mirror before breakfast, and becomes convinced that her head is too large for her body. The teenager who is secure because he thinks he finally understands enough of the rules to be thought of as a quasi-normal humanoid will be convinced he is a terminal social misfit because of an embarrassing moment at a party.

Our son Ethan was about fifteen when he came in one afternoon obviously discouraged. I asked him what was wrong. He told me that every day, people made fun of him on the way to or from school. He said, "I see them looking at me and talking and laughing." It was a tough period for him. He was rapidly growing. He was unsure of himself, his body, and his looks. He was in that limbo-land between boy and man, and he projected his insecurity to everyone around him. This time of physical insecurity provided many opportunities for listening, love, encouragement, and the Gospel.

This is a period when the teenager is flooded with questions. Who am I? Do I look okay? Why is life so confusing? Will I ever remember all of the rules? What is right and what is wrong? Who is right and who is wrong? What is happening to my body? What am I going to do with my life? Will I be a success or a failure? Do people really like me? Am I normal? Is my family normal? Is God for real?

The world of physical appearance, the world of relationships, the world of ideas, the world of responsibilities, and the world of the future all are scary and uncertain to the teenager. It is this reality that makes this time such an age of opportunity. In the midst of these questions, significant biblical themes can be discussed, such as the doctrine of creation, the fear of man, the sovereignty of God, the nature of truth, identity in Christ, and spiritual warfare and temptation, to mention a few. In the context of daily insecurities we have an opportunity to help the teen make conceptual theology become functional, life-shaping theology. Each of these questions provides an op-

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portunity to discuss, test, experience, apply, and internalize important biblical truths.

***Teenage Rebellion***

The stories of gross and flagrant rebellion are one of the reasons that parents fear the teen years. The thought that the once-precious child will turn into the leader of the violent neighborhood gang is the parent's worst nightmare. We have to re-evaluate our expectation of automatic teen rebellion. At the same time, we have to recognize that this is an age when children push at the boundaries, when temptation abounds, and when peer relationships do not always encourage right behavior.

We received one of those dreaded calls one Sunday afternoon. It was a mother in our church telling us that our son had not stayed at her house overnight as we had thought. She told us that our son had asked her son to cover for him, but he was conscience-stricken and went to his mother for help. She called us. We were afraid and disappointed. For a moment we gave in to worst-case scenarios. How many more lies had there been? Were we living with a son we did not know? At the same time, we were so deeply thankful for the Lord's rescuing mercy. We questioned our son and he confessed. It was a watershed moment of choosing whom he would serve. We left the room so thankful that an event that we hoped would never happen had, in God's plan of mercy, taken place.

There are desires that make the teenager susceptible to the temptation to rebel: the desire to be an individual and think for oneself, the desire for freedom, the desire to try new things, the desire to test the boundaries, the desire for control, the desire to make one's own decisions, the desire to be different, the desire to fit in, and the desire to be accepted. These, with a host of other desires, all fueled by the au-

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tonomy and self-centeredness of the sin nature, can surely lead the teenager astray.

At the same time, these struggles of rebellion and submission become the context in which another set of critical biblical issues can be discussed, applied, and internalized. Biblical truths having to do with authority, sowing and reaping, the nature of truth and falsehood, wisdom and foolishness, law and grace, confession, repentance, forgiveness, and the nature and function of the heart all get put on the table in the midst of these crucial moments of submission and rebellion. Parents with eyes toward opportunity will have many, many openings to deal with central issues of biblical faith in the life of their teenager.

### ***A Teenager's Widening World***

One of the frightening things for parents and a source of insecurity for their teenagers is the sudden explosion of the teen's world. All of a sudden, it seems as if the world gets bigger. That little boy or girl who played for hours on the backyard swing set now drives miles away to new locations, new experiences, and new friends.

This world is not always exciting to the teenager. Sometimes it seems scary and overwhelming. There are moments when the teen is alive with the joy of discovery, and there are other times when he is shy and avoiding. Sometime he enjoys being a teenager, while at other times he seems afraid of the new expectations laid upon him.

There is no stopping the widening of his world. It is a world of new friends, new locations, new opportunities and responsibilities, new thoughts, new plans, new freedoms, new temptations, new feelings, new experiences, and new discoveries. All of the joys and insecurities of this widening world provide opportunities to help your teenager really understand and personally internalize fundamental truths. These include the sovereignty and providence of God, the ever-

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present help of the Lord, the nature of biblical relationships, spiritual warfare, discipline, self-control, contentment, faithfulness, trustworthiness, the nature of the body of Christ, the world, the flesh, and the Devil, the principles of responsibility and accountability, biblical priorities, discovery and stewardship of gifts, and many other biblical truths and principles. That's quite a list! But this widening world provides wonderful opportunities for parents to prepare their teenager for an effective and productive life in God's world.

***Rejecting the Cynicism***

The place to begin as we build a biblical understanding of parenting our teenagers is to reject the dark, foreboding cynicism of our culture. Yes, the teen years are years of change, insecurity, and tumult, yet these are the very things that God uses to bring truth to light in the eyes of our children. If we are to be his instruments, we must deal with our own idolatry and bring a robust biblical faith to each rocky moment, a faith that believes that God rules over all things for our sake, that he is an ever-present help in trouble, that he is at work in every situation accomplishing his redemptive purpose, and that his Word is powerful, active, and effective.

We do not want to be driven into bunkers of survival by teenage insecurity, rebellion, and widening world. Rather, we want to take Paul's call to Timothy as God's agenda for our work with our teens. "Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke, and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction" (2 Tim. 4:2). We want to approach these important years with hope; not hope in our teenagers or hope in ourselves, but hope in God who is able to do more than anything we could ever ask or imagine as we seize the opportunities he places in our path. We want to approach these years with a sense of purpose and a sense of calling.

When people ask you what you do, say, "I am the parent of a

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teenager. It is the most important job I have ever had. Everything else I do for a living is secondary.” Then say, “You know, I have never had a job that is so exciting! I have never had a job that is so full of opportunities. Every day I am needed. Every day I do things that are important, worthwhile, and lasting. I wouldn’t give up this job for anything!”