

# Stepping Into our Lives: Reflections on being a step-mom

By Jane Kirkpatrick



My last two novels grew out of a desire to discover my grandmother and what I call memory DNA, how we shared more than eye color or a love of the arts. She too married a man with three children. She too grieved with her husband at the death of a son. My grandmother shared time with her step-children's mother and found a way through the mine field of powerful adult relationships keeping children from being further wounded by the choices adults had made.

She stepped up well. I was an adult before I realized that people I called Aunt Winnie, Uncle Bob or Uncle Russell were actually my mother's half-siblings, my grandmother's step-sons and daughter. Somehow she raised her children to understand the connection between each of them as children cherished by their shared father and children loved by God. Descendants of those half-sibs tell stories of my grandmother as someone who cared for them, someone they liked being around and adored.

She must have stepped over those moments of disappointment with a forgotten Mother's Day card focusing instead on creating new memories. She must have cherished shared laughter over a bedtime story or stepped aside allowing her step-children to have alone time with their father accepting that these were requirements in a marriage not just between her and her husband but with his children as well. I know she stepped in at times of their mother's illnesses, sharing her comforting love.

Thirty-four years ago, when I took on the challenge of becoming a step-mother, I was buttressed by great loves, too: mine for my husband; his for me and his children; and our shared love of God. I confess, though, I had a pretty romanticized view. I dreamed of erasing the image of Hansel and Gretel's shrewish step-mom. I had high hopes like any new bride and any new mom had.

What I hadn't prepared for, despite my background in mental health, was reality! The painful moments of confusion and exclusion and lack of recognition. I wasn't their mother and yet I performed motherly duties, often. I didn't share my husband's memories with his children so easily spoken at the dinner table often leaving me shadowed in the kitchen. I was frustrated when we discovered the kids had managed to get the two of us arguing while they skipped out the door. This wasn't fun at all!

Thank goodness for good friends who stepped in to offer counsel and prayer. They reminded me that what our three children and I had in common was a shared love for this man and a desire to heal the wounds of past decisions while growing new flesh to form a new family. When their mother lay dying, I knew my stepping and stumbling as a step parent had been worthy work as she told me: "You've been a friend to me. I leave my children in the best of hands."

Our kids are grown now yet Mother's Day is still a celebration of stepping: Stepping over hurts, to find the loving core within each of us. Stepping forward, to assert the importance of marriage to model for our children what caring and

commitment look like. And stepping aside without feeling displaced knowing my step-children share with me a desire to be accepted, to know that we are loved both by the man in our lives and the Creator of us all. It's a day when I count the steps we've taken together to weather the storms and celebrate the many more days of sailing calmer seas.

The word "family" comes from the Latin word *Famalus* meaning *servant*. I think that's what my grandmother must have figured out. To have a servant's heart as a step-mother is to live the story of how God steps into our lives to bring healing and grace every day of the year.

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