

Living into commitments: A letter to Derek

by [Gilbert Meilaender](#) in the [Jul 12, 2003](#) issue

Dear Derek: In my last letter I commented on how casually I said yes when Mom asked whether we should agree to have you come into our home as a foster child. A simple decision on a busy day, and it has shaped the rest of my life—and yours. This is worth our thinking about together.

Suppose I'd never said yes. How would my life have been different? I'd have had more time to get my work done. I wouldn't, at this point in life, have responsibilities to a child who was still in school. (I still remember walking down the street with Mom for "back to school night" when you were in kindergarten. I just began laughing, hardly able to believe that I was starting all over again—admiring the art work, looking at the projects and so forth.) I suppose if I'd not said yes I might have had a little more money to spend along the way, and Mom would certainly have had far more free time. (We also wouldn't have had a string of 24 consecutive years of children's piano recitals, which may be a few more than any human being needs. We would have been able to cut it off at a decent 18 years or so.)

But, of course, that's not all. I'd never have heard your cheerful "good morning"—so regularly and amazingly cheerful even at 6:00 a.m. (And in general, I think, I'd have suffered for not having such a cheerful person around me all these years.) I'd have missed years of playing "pepper" in the backyard with you (until my right elbow finally gave out). I'd never have seen a bedroom decorated for Halloween the way yours is. I'd never have realized that there are people who really see how things look, who can tell you where the chimney was on a house they saw once and can sketch the way the front of a building looked. It's not likely that I'd know who "Kenny G" is, nor that I'd have had anyone around who shared my simple joy of watching old videos and calling out (in advance) different lines.

In short, you've worked me hard (and are still working me hard), but I can't imagine that I'd have laughed nearly as much if you hadn't been around all these years.

There's a more important point, though, for us to think about here. Much too often we suppose that the way to live is to think through what we want to do and then

figure out how to do it. People talk constantly about setting goals. (Colleges and universities love to do this, except that they get even more pretentious, talking about their "mission." How I dislike it.) Thinking this way does not really prepare us well for living as responsible people, because the truth is that life seldom works like that.

Much of the time we're already committed in important ways before we really decide what our "goals" should be. And, because we're already committed, other people have expectations based on those commitments. The trick of life is not to figure out who I am and then decide what sorts of commitments such a person should make. The trick is to become the person who can carry out the commitments I've already made. Don't imagine that the point of life is to set goals. Think, instead, that its point is to be faithful to the commitments already built into your life. People who make goals central are people who think the most important things in life are consciously chosen. People who make faithfulness central are people who realize that, quite often, our obligations come to us in ways that are unexpected, unchosen and even unwanted.

You came into our home—and then you just stayed and stayed—a little bald-headed kid with glasses. I didn't choose that or decide that things should be like that. But somewhere along the way I gradually realized that you'd become my son—and that, therefore, we had responsibilities to each other. The task—and the gift—then, is to recognize the fact and learn to live up to its inner meaning. I think we've managed that, and, speaking for myself, I hope I last long enough to work you as hard as you've worked me.

Love,

Dad

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