

# different

The Story of an  
Outside-the-Box Kid and  
the Mom Who Loved Him

**SALLY CLARKSON**  
**NATHAN CLARKSON**

Sally's and Nathan's voices are needed in this day and age of parenting. This book was an encouragement for me on so many levels, as a mama, friend, and woman in ministry. Both Sally and Nathan display the love and grace of Jesus toward each other, and that is a message that transfers to people all over the world.

**JAMIE IVEY**

Host of *The Happy Hour with Jamie Ivey* podcast

For anyone who has ever felt different, this inspiring book is a soothing balm and a call to arms to build the life of your dreams—no matter where you are.

**CLAIRE DIAZ-ORTIZ**

Author and entrepreneur, [ClaireDiazOrtiz.com](http://ClaireDiazOrtiz.com)

I loved this book. Sally comes alongside parents raising difficult children and offers support, encouragement, and community. We get to see inside our kids through Nathan's words. It's a beautiful, deeply moving memoir that sends a clear and important message to our culture: Being different is more than okay. It's a gift.

**KRISTEN WELCH**

Author of *Raising Grateful Kids in an Entitled World*

I'm a mom with an outside-the-box kid—a child I love dearly but who brings me to my knees on a daily (sometimes hourly) basis. The wisdom from this book gives me the confidence and perspective I yearn for in parenting my quirky, beloved child. I'm beyond grateful that both Sally and Nathan have shared their story with us. It fills me with hope.

**TSH OXENREIDER**

Author of *At Home in the World* and *Notes from a Blue Bike*

I have watched the ministries of Sally and Nathan over the years, and I'm thrilled to see how God has used a "different" boy to bless so many. This is a book of hope and inspiration told through the eyes of a mom who, like so many parents today, must deal with the day-to-day challenges of working with a unique and special child.

**DR. SCOTT TURANSKY**

Cofounder of the National Center for Biblical Parenting; author of *Parenting Is Heart Work*

In *Different*, Sally Clarkson invited me to pursue God's heart for my own outside-the-box child. Her seasoned and experienced words lifted this mama's eyes off *What could be wrong with my child?* or *What could be wrong with me?* and on to Christ and all the possibilities of His beauty and power in the life of a person. This is a message for every parent's heart. I recommend these pages both to those who feel like they have outside-the-box children and to those whose children color within the lines.

**SARA HAGERTY**

Author of *Every Bitter Thing Is Sweet*

This is a story that will touch the heart of any mother. We bear the weight of our children's struggles, wishing we could take on their frustration and pain, often without help or answers. *Different* brings hope to every family with a child who breaks the mold. Sally and Nathan show us that God's strength is made perfect in weakness. Before He can use us greatly, He must wound us deeply.

**AINSLEY ARMENT**

Founder of Wild + Free

Reading *Different* lifted a huge burden off my chest, letting me breathe easy again. I can't thank Nathan and Sally enough for having the courage to share their story in detail. Just knowing there are other parents who have lovingly raised "different" kids gives me hope and helps me feel less alone as a mother.

**JAMIE C. MARTIN**

Editor of SimpleHomeschool.net; author of *Give Your Child the World*

God has used each of Sally Clarkson's books in a powerful way in my life as I travel down the ever-curving road of motherhood. I've loved them all, but *Different* is one of my new favorites. Sally's and Nathan's testimonies of God's faithfulness will increase your faith as you witness their doubt, heartbreak, and struggle, and as you come to see that you are not alone. Sally and Nathan speak right into your pain and uncertainty. In the rawness of each story, you will find strength, beauty, and hope.

**ANGELA PERRITT**

Founder and director of Love God Greatly; coauthor of *You Are Loved* and *You Are Forgiven*

For decades, Sally Clarkson has been a strong, wise guide for families. In *Different*, she is more vulnerable than ever before, recording a memoir of moving through a refining experience and sharing her notes from the journey. She and her son Nathan recount this ongoing struggle with faith-affirming honesty, offering insight and hope for families who face similarly bewildering battles. An at-times-painful story, *Different* is honest about Sally's and Nathan's progress without ending in a neat and tidy total victory. Instead, the book invites us into a faithful, resolved embrace of the story God is weaving even through the most painful and perplexing of our weaknesses.

S. D. SMITH

Author of *The Green Ember*; cofounder of [www.storywarren.com](http://www.storywarren.com)

Sally and Nathan Clarkson's *Different* is a breath of fresh air for parents of different kids. While many books for outside-the-box kids focus on best practices, *Different* is . . . well . . . *different*. As you read the journey of this mother and son, you will smile, you will cry, and you will realize that you are *never* alone. And really, isn't that what we all want to know?

CAITLIN FITZPATRICK CURLEY

School psychologist, homeschooler, and founder of [My-Little-Poppies.com](http://My-Little-Poppies.com)

With this book, Sally Clarkson offers weary moms the nourishing feast for which they are starved. With equal parts empathy and wisdom, she breathes hope into the lives of parents who daily labor to lovingly raise outside-the-box children. Nathan grants us unprecedented, invaluable insight into the mind of the child as he grows. Sally assures us that though we will certainly be challenged, humbled, and humiliated, this story is not about us, but about being faithful to God to raise a uniquely challenged and challenging child. With warm understanding, she gives us tangible tools and healthy, hearty food for the journey.

ELIZABETH FOSS

Mother of nine; author of *Small Steps for Catholic Moms*

Sally and Nathan have given us hope by giving us the gift of sight. They have pulled back the curtain and helped us see the tender struggle of raising a child who breaks out of the boxes we try to fit people in. As a result, we learn to see challenge as a gift in disguise. This book makes

visible what has been in plain sight to our family for years now: The Clarksons wholeheartedly love God and one another through the mess and the mystery of life and faith.

**GLENN PACKIAM**

Pastor; author of *Discover the Mystery of Faith, Lucky, and Secondhand Jesus*

Sally has protected her family by keeping certain stories hidden from the public sphere until now. The stories and truths in *Different* have not been shared before, and they will absolutely bring hope and freedom to those who struggle with their “different” children and think, *I can't do this; it's just too hard*. If you have an outside-the-box child, this is a must-read.

**SARAH MAE**

Coauthor with Sally Clarkson of *Desperate: Hope for the Mom Who Needs to Breathe*

As a parent who has often felt alone and completely out of my depth in raising a child who is outside the box, I found tender companionship in these pages. With vulnerability and candor, Sally and Nathan Clarkson have bravely lifted the veil on the struggles that are often unspoken and yet silently shape many families. Through this book, the journey of faith forged in their own lives has the power to breathe life into souls who are burned out on formulas and prescriptive solutions. If you are desperate for a way forward, longing for a future that is flourishing for your child, and dream of learning to parent with peace and grace, this book will guide you as it extends hope, healing, and the very present and tangible love of God for each of His children.

**KRISTEN KILL**

Author and blogger at *Hope with Feathers*

As a mother of two outside-the-box children, I found myself tearing up and nodding my head in agreement as I read *Different*. In the end, I felt so very grateful for this book. Sally and Nathan are both vulnerable and real as they describe the day-to-day life of a “different” child. Reading the unique perspectives of both mother and child is powerful. Moreover, the love that flows throughout this book makes even the most difficult experiences hope-filled and encouraging. I cannot recommend *Different* enough!

**SHAWNA WINGERT**

Author of *Everyday Autism* and *Special Education at Home*;  
writer at [www.nottheformerthings.com](http://www.nottheformerthings.com)

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**SALLY CLARKSON**  
**NATHAN CLARKSON**  
ILLUSTRATIONS BY NATHAN CLARKSON



*The nonfiction imprint of  
Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.*

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Visit Nathan Clarkson at [NathanClarkson.me](http://NathanClarkson.me).

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*Different: The Story of an Outside-the-Box Kid and the Mom Who Loved Him*

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Designed by Nathan Clarkson and Dean H. Renninger

Edited by Anne Christian Buchanan

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### Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Clarkson, Sally, author.

Title: Different : the story of an outside-the-box kid and the mom who loved him / Sally Clarkson and Nathan Clarkson.

Description: Carol Stream, IL : Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 2016. | Includes bibliographical references.

Identifiers: LCCN 2016041361 | ISBN 9781496420114 (sc)

Subjects: LCSH: Parents of children with disabilities—Religious life. | Parenting—Religious aspects—Christianity. | Child rearing—Religious aspects—Christianity. | Clarkson, Nathan. | Clarkson, Sally. | Mothers and sons—Religious aspects—Christianity. | Obsessive-compulsive disorder in children—Patients. | Obsessive-compulsive disorder in children—Patients—Religious life.

Classification: LCC BV4596.P35 C53 2016 | DDC 248.8/431--dc23 LC record available at [https://urldefense.proofpoint.com/v2/url?u=https-3A\\_\\_lccn.loc.gov\\_2016041361&d=DQIFAg&c=6BNjZEuL\\_DAs869UxGis0g&r=ZIF6A1J\\_SMm9xAyjgyDor34CB-fqQRaraBLNVSDnrVo&m=2gKdDxMXrJhTp9UCpWHrrAWSFzF8P4dcYqsF6vggEJA&s=yGr4wilt8OWejcGQX5DAgRoolOAYdFx7blo6gEP6a-U&e=](https://urldefense.proofpoint.com/v2/url?u=https-3A__lccn.loc.gov_2016041361&d=DQIFAg&c=6BNjZEuL_DAs869UxGis0g&r=ZIF6A1J_SMm9xAyjgyDor34CB-fqQRaraBLNVSDnrVo&m=2gKdDxMXrJhTp9UCpWHrrAWSFzF8P4dcYqsF6vggEJA&s=yGr4wilt8OWejcGQX5DAgRoolOAYdFx7blo6gEP6a-U&e=)

Printed in the United States of America

22 21 20 19 18 17 16  
7 6 5 4 3 2 1

# CONTENTS

*Read This First (Even If You Never  
Read Introductions)* . . . . . xi

1. **I'm Different** . . . . . I  
LEARNING TO SEE AND CELEBRATE GOD'S FINGERPRINTS  
IN OUR LIVES
  
2. **I Run to You** . . . . . 9  
LESSONS FROM THE MIDDLE OF THE NIGHT
  
3. **Launch Code** . . . . . 29  
THE BEAUTY AND CHALLENGE OF GROWING UP DIFFERENT
  
4. **Harnessing a Hero** . . . . . 45  
CHARACTER TRAINING THROUGH STORIES AND INSPIRATION
  
5. **A Heart like Superman**. . . . . 61  
LIVING INTO A HIGHER PURPOSE
  
6. **The Grand Performance**. . . . . 81  
THE THERAPY OF NATURE AND CREATION

7.	Wrestling God . . . . .	95
	WHY LIFE IS A FULL-CONTACT SPORT	
8.	Different Drumming . . . . .	105
	EMBRACING THE SONGS OF OUR HEARTS	
9.	A Place to Belong . . . . .	129
	A HOME BASE FOR THRIVING	
10.	Voices of Darkness, Voices of Truth . . . . .	151
	THE TRICKY JOURNEY TOWARD MATURITY	
11.	Naming the Enemy . . . . .	163
	WHY ACCEPTANCE IS ONLY A FIRST STEP	
12.	Beyond “Why Me?” . . . . .	183
	FACING THE REALITY OF “ALWAYS DIFFERENT”	
13.	Watch Me Fly! . . . . .	199
	LIVING FOR GOD’S APPLAUSE	
	<i>Epilogue: Don’t Give Up on Your Story . . . . .</i>	<i>217</i>
	<i>Notes . . . . .</i>	<i>223</i>
	<i>About the Authors . . . . .</i>	<i>225</i>

READ THIS FIRST  
(EVEN IF YOU NEVER  
READ INTRODUCTIONS)

**NATHAN**

*They tell me “Stop.” “Just don’t.” “Be normal.”  
So I try and I try and I try and I try  
Not to let the demons in my mind  
Be the ones who define  
My every move,  
My every thought,  
My every rhyme.  
But sometimes I feel like I’m all alone in a crowded room,  
And no matter what I try, or what I do,  
I can’t make my eyes see like they’re supposed to.  
I can’t see the world like the rest of you do  
Because I’ve got something called OCD—  
Obsessive-compulsive disorder—  
But I’m starting to think these letters mean something  
different,*

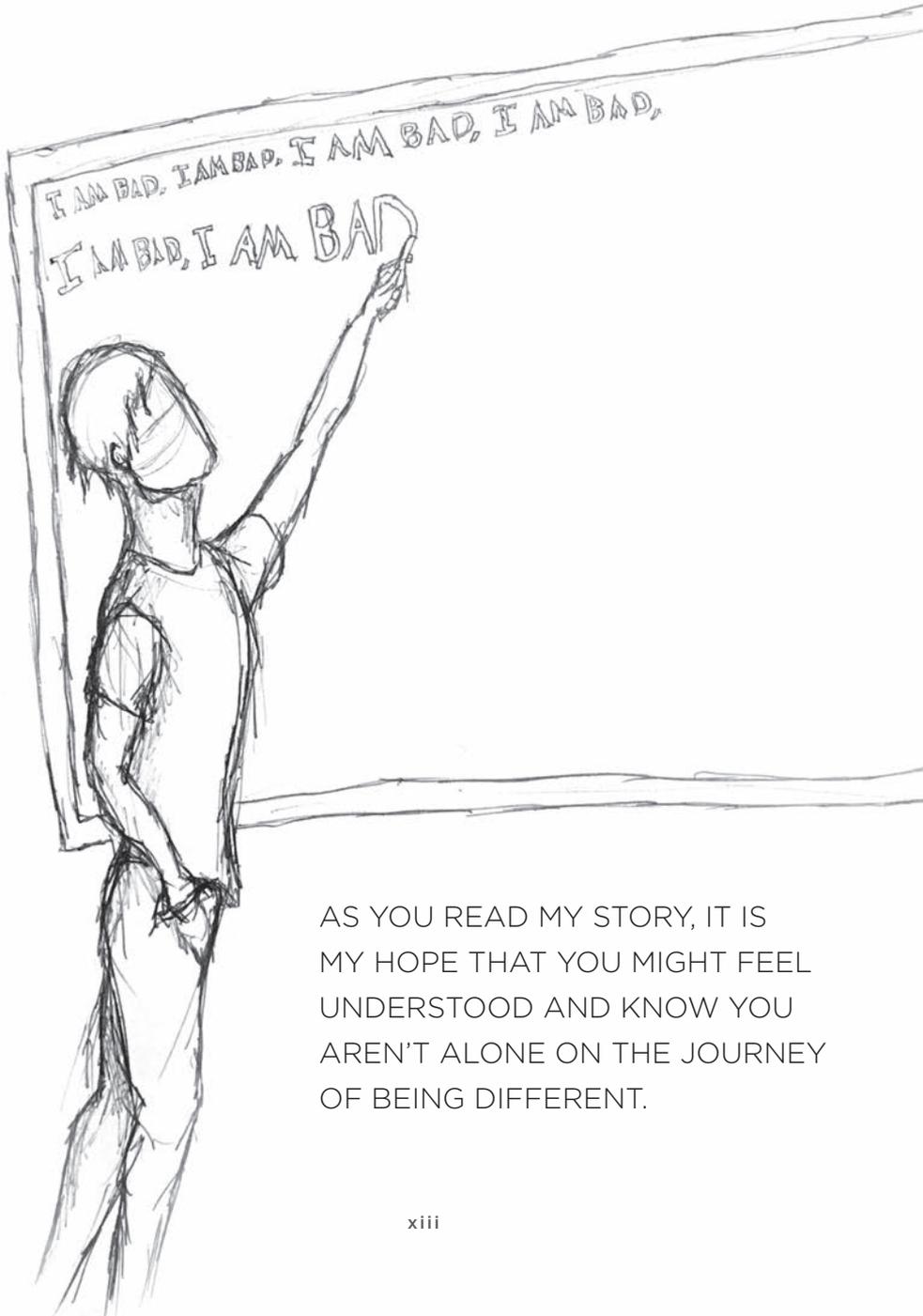
DIFFERENT

*Less of a sitcom and more of a horror.  
Maybe the O stands for "Oh, my God,  
Why did you give this to me?  
Why can't I just be normal like he or she?  
Why can't I feel clean  
And not feel the need to wash my hands until they bleed?"  
Maybe the C stands for "C'mon, can't you see I'm in pain?  
I can't even hug, kiss, or touch my loved ones  
As they leave on a plane."  
And maybe the D stands for "Despair,"  
Like the kind that I felt when I sat on those stairs  
With my head in my hands and I said, "This is not fair.  
God, do you care?  
God, can you tell that this man that you love is living  
in hell?"*

*And there in the silence I heard God say,  
"My son, my son, I made you this way."*

*I said, "God, you've got to be kidding me! My mind is  
all wrong."  
He said, "Son, don't you see your mind is a song?  
It's a song I wrote for only you to sing.  
It's unique and it's beautiful and it will help others see."*

READ THIS FIRST



AS YOU READ MY STORY, IT IS  
MY HOPE THAT YOU MIGHT FEEL  
UNDERSTOOD AND KNOW YOU  
AREN'T ALONE ON THE JOURNEY  
OF BEING DIFFERENT.

I pressed Record on the camera staring at me atop the tripod, then quickly walked back to stand in front of my backdrop—a black sheet draped across my front door. I took a deep breath, locked eyes with the lens, and began.

I had the words typed out on my phone, but I didn't need to look at the screen. I knew them by heart because they had been swirling around in my head for the past month.

I've never really thought of myself as a poet. But for some reason, as I went to express my innermost thoughts, they came out in verse. Now here I was about to perform and upload a piece of spoken-word poetry that came directly from my heart for the world to see.<sup>1</sup>

For as long as I can remember, I wondered if I was the only one who felt this way—that it was me and then the rest of the world. So I decided to pour all the years of frustration, hurt, and wandering into a two-minute video and set it free into the world, hoping that maybe it would reach someone who felt the same. The poem offered no stats, quick fixes, or life hacks. It simply shared a glimpse of my story—all I really had to offer.

Little did I know when I hit Upload Video that in the next few days it would gain thousands of views. Then, as the views added up one by one, I started receiving messages and comments from viewers around the world.

“Thank you so much for this.”

“This is my exact experience.”

“I have always felt the same way.”

“I've always felt different too.”

It was amazing, beautiful, and humbling to know that a roughly made home video could connect and encourage people from every walk of life. People who had felt like me.

People who had always felt different.

These pages you have opened explore what it's like to grow up different. They are told from my point of view and also from my mother's, because this is a journey we've shared.

This book will not try to fix you. You won't find statistics or studies or a bunch of how-tos. Instead, we'll simply share our stories and our personal thoughts. We've also included a few of my drawings, which enabled me to tell my story and express my feelings in another way.

I feel confident with this approach because I have found that stories are powerful. They have the ability to reach out, inspire, and give us hope. It is my hope that with every page you turn, as I share my heart, you will perhaps find yourself thinking, *Me too*. That as you read a little more of my story and my mom's, you might feel understood—perhaps for the first time—and know you aren't alone on the journey of being different.

## *Sally*

Tonight is the eve of my sixty-third birthday. Having stolen a few rare minutes alone on my front porch, I've been rocking gently in one of my white Cracker Barrel rocking chairs, sipping a cold drink, and listening to music as the fresh mountain breezes gently rattle the aspen trees in my yard.

I've also been reflecting on my life as Nathan's mother and wondering how to introduce you to my side of this story.

As I pondered these memories, music from one of my favorite film scores came floating from my tiny speaker—part of a playlist my musician son, Joel, recorded for me to listen to when I am relaxing. Cellist Yo-Yo Ma was playing a song from the 1986 movie *The Mission*. A hauntingly beautiful piece, the kind that wraps itself around your soul and touches deep, unspoken-of places inside that no one sees, it reflects both the exceptional beauty of the movie and the heartbreak found within the story. How well I remember that bittersweet story of a man trying to find redemption for his personal deficiencies and the mistakes he has made in the journey of his life.

As I listened to the countermelody of the cello mixed with the lighter refrain of the main tune, the sadness of the song brought tears to my eyes. Then I realized that this deeply beautiful music was a reflection to me of my son Nathan's story—profoundly rich, filled with vibrant and beautiful notes, but possessing a melancholy side as well.

This is our story, at once a tale of tears and heartbreak and a depiction of adventure, joy, and laughter and the unbreakable bond between mother and son. There's a lot about it that even today I don't understand. But this I know: God must have loved me a lot to give me the gift of Nathan.

The name means “gift of God.” And Nathan *is* a gift—to me, to our entire family, and to many other people as well. But from the very beginning, Nathan was different from

other children. He was my outside-the-box little boy, different in a very different way.

.....

There is a memory from early in Nathan's childhood that is burnished deeply into my mind, the vividness of which has never gone away. Perhaps it was the defining moment when God spoke to my heart: *This child is truly a different kind of different. There is no formula, no disciplinary philosophy that is going to work with this little boy. This one will require blindly walking by faith, with a willingness to learn and understand how to be his parent. I made him. I will teach you. Are you willing to learn and grow?*

As a mama of three little ones under five years old, I lived in a tornado of activity. Someone was always talking, crying, making messes, needing me. But on this particular day, just rolling myself out of bed required all of my mental and physical strength. Exhaustion rolled over me like a fog, clouding my thoughts. Gathering suitcases, car seats, blankies, stuffed animals, and snacks, not to mention clothing three squirming bodies, required herculean strength.

By eight thirty that morning, I was already running on empty. The day already seemed a week long, and all we had done was to get up, eat breakfast, get dressed, grab our packed bags, and cram ourselves into our little car. But we had many more hours—and miles—to go. We were moving from California to Texas, a process that would take eighteen

hours of plane trips and car rides. For me, the prospect presented a formidable challenge.

And then there was Nathan.

Already just beyond toddlerhood, Nathan was clearly different from other kids. Not different because of his face shape or his freckles or his personality. A different kind of different. He did not fit into any boxes we could define. Agitation seemed to be a part of his internal motor that revved up each day. People and the world at large seemed to bring him frustration on a regular basis. Every ordinary moment held the possibility of an explosion. How in the world would Nathan make it through two plane trips, three airports, and an entire day of interrupted routines without melting down?

He didn't. The day almost did me in.

Coping with a toddler who was wiggling, screaming, fussing, and resisting at every point of that journey left me deeply discouraged and emotionally flat. My husband, Clay, and I took "Nathan" turns through the plane rides, the long lines of waiting, the sitting still during the trip, the strolling around the airport as we waited for the next leg of the journey, leaving our two older—but not much older!—children to more or less fend for themselves.

Yes, I was "that mom"—the one with the squirming, screaming child that everyone points at and hopes they will not have to sit next to on the plane.

But finally we made it to our destination in Dallas. Surely reprieve would be ahead. And we would be stopping for food at one of Clay's favorite restaurant destinations. Located in a

very ritzy and prominent part of town, this beloved establishment was patronized by the wealthy of the neighborhood. The bakery, established by a fine pastry chef, attracted hundreds of people each day. And the dinner buffet—an intriguing mixture of sophisticated dishes and comfort food—made this a special place to Clay. Assuming there would be something to please every palate, he hoped it would be a treat for the kids and me as well.

At the restaurant, we all made it through the buffet line. We intentionally picked a table in the far corner of the room, as far from the crowded center as possible. I had wrestled Nathan in my arms through the whole line and to our seats, hoping that food would appease him for just a few short minutes so I could gobble down my food.

But just as we all sat down at our table and began to eat, Nathan slid down from his chair to the floor, stretched out to his full little-boy length, and began to scream and yell and throw food. I tried to soothe him and placate him, but he lunged out to strike me.

That did it.

I got to my feet and walked away, leaving my toddler screaming and kicking on the floor. I hoped that somehow Clay and his mother, who had joined us, would find the heart to stay with him, because I couldn't. Exhausted and frazzled, having spent every ounce of patience I could muster, I could find nothing inside to deal with him at that moment. I was wasted from the embarrassment of everyone watching and whispering and pointing. After giving, loving, trying

hour after hour (and day after day) to figure out something that would appease this little boy, I had reached what felt like the end of my rope.

And yes, I felt guilty. Guilty for leaving him, for leaving Clay and my mother-in-law to deal with him, definitely guilty for leaving his brother and sister quietly eating at the table and pretending they did not see what was going on. But at that moment I had no intention of going back. I had served, loved, held, comforted, run after, placated to the end of my strength. Somehow they would all have to cope without me.

I casually walked across the room to the bakery counter, where elegantly frosted cakes and delectable pies filled the racks. Though I was seething with frustration, I put on a calm front, studying the baked goods as if planning a purchase. It was my way of hiding from all the faces, the dirty looks, the insecurity I was feeling at that moment. Whisper-praying that I would be able to settle down, I tried to regain control over my raging emotions.

As I stood there, Nathan's screams still permeating the room, an elderly man who was attending to customers at the bakery display looked at me, not knowing I was the child's mother. "That boy needs a strong hand!" he said in a booming Texan drawl.

I shook my head in agreement, looking over at my family as if I didn't know them. But inside I was thinking, *I don't know what he needs, but he needs something I cannot give right now.*

The memory was a defining one for Clay and me. We already knew that something was different about Nathan. He

had moments of sweet little-boy antics, but we never knew when he would erupt in frustration, anger, and agitation at a moment's notice—and we had no idea how to settle his little heart.

Of course, any little one might be frazzled by a day traveling across thousands of miles. But this extreme behavior was becoming more and more common to our daily family life. And this was the beginning of our trying to figure out what made him such an outside-the-box little boy and how we could possibly parent him.

It took a long time before we finally had names for some of Nathan's differences. Actually, what we eventually had were letters that described clinical disorders and a form of medically diagnosable mental illness:

- OCD—obsessive-compulsive disorder
- ADHD—attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder
- ODD—oppositional defiant disorder

Added to this alphabet soup were some learning issues, some personality quirks, a strong will, plus a number of characteristics that have some qualities of autism and even now defy our understanding. And eventually we did find some help and support to add to the many things we learned through trial and error and love and listening—and lots and lots of grace.

We also learned, through the same trial and error and grace, to hold fast to what our hearts insisted (at least in quiet moments). That our boy was not a diagnosis. Not a

problem to be solved or a disorder to be fixed. He was a child to be guided and trained and gloried in. And Nathan's differences—yes, even the ones that sometimes exasperated him and us—were, like Nathan himself, also part of the gift he is to the world and to us as his family.

Today Nathan is twenty-seven, and I can honestly say he is one of my closest, dearest friends. There is almost no one I would rather talk to, and few understand my dreams, thoughts, ideals, and struggles the way he does. I learn so much when we collaborate on projects together, as he is a constant source of ideas and mental stimulation for me. But as far as we know to this date, he will carry his issues with him his whole life, and we as a family will continue to learn more each year about how to love him better, how to adjust to his unique needs, and how to walk with him through his story more graciously.

Last fall, after he made his first movie, *Confessions of a Prodigal Son*, which was sold in Walmart and later picked up by Netflix, Nathan started receiving letters from all over the world.

"Mom," he told me, "most of the letters I get are from kids or parents wondering how I made it through childhood and lived to make a movie. We should write a book together, telling people our story—how we made it, how I felt, how you felt along the way. People like us need someone to identify with amidst their disabilities and differences."

"Are you sure you want me to be honest about how I felt along the way? Are you sure you don't mind people in the public arena knowing your story and struggles? If we write

it, we will need to reveal some of the raw stories that took place in our family.”

“I want it to be real. And I want to help people like us because we had so very few to encourage us along this path. I think we should do it, Mom.”

And so, his idea became this book. We’ve written it as a team—in the hope that our experience might help those who struggle with being different and those who love them.

.....

Before we go much further, it might be helpful for you to know a little bit about our journey as a family. Because this book is written thematically—the chapters and stories don’t proceed in strict chronological order—you might find them easier to follow if you know a little more from the outset about who we are and where we’ve been.

We are a ministry/entrepreneur/artistic family. After becoming a woman of faith in college and working on college campuses for a couple of years, I embarked on my first missionary assignment—to Communist Poland—when I was just twenty-three. Clay and I were friends for many years, but we finally dated and got married when I was in my late twenties. We welcomed Sarah, our firstborn, while we were living in Denver, Colorado, and we had Joel two and a half years later in Vienna, Austria. Nathan arrived another two and a half years after that in Long Beach, California. And Joy, our beloved “caboose,” would not come along until another six years later, when we lived in Texas.

Because of the pioneer nature of our work, we moved seventeen times when our first three children were little. For a time, when we were establishing our ministry and publishing enterprise (without a salary!), we lived with Clay's mother in tiny Walnut Springs, Texas—population 712! These were the wild years when our children roamed free on two hundred acres of land full of snakes, bugs, and fields to explore and adventures at every turn. It was here that Joy was born, a joyful surprise when I was just shy of forty-two. Next came a move to the Rocky Mountains, where our home backed up to twenty-five thousand acres of national forest. Finally, after one more move to Tennessee, we settled in our beloved home in Monument, Colorado, where we have lived for the past twelve years.

Through it all, Clay and I remained involved in our work and ministry. I wrote thirteen books. Clay added more. We traveled the world together, speaking at conferences and to a variety of audiences. Our children were raised by our sides as we worked from our home and spoke in hotels and conference centers, spending time with people from many different cultures and backgrounds. Home was always a haven we cherished between travel for ministry, but we also learned—and taught our children—to “make home” wherever we were.

Now, even though we have finally settled down, in a sense, we remain a traveling family. Clay travels less these days because of some back issues, but I am still the adventurer. Our work still takes me across the country and to many international venues, and I take advantage of any excuse to visit our children wherever they are in the world. As I

write this, Sarah is married and living in Oxford, England, while completing her theology degree. Joel lives near her in Cambridge, pursuing a graduate degree in choral music, composition, and conducting at the university there. Joy is completing her master's at the University of St Andrews in Scotland. And Nathan, after studying acting in New York City and then pursuing his dreams in Los Angeles, is now back in New York, actively involved in a career as an actor, screenwriter, filmmaker, blogger, and author.

Nathan and I have always had a very close personal relationship. Most OCD kids, we have learned, have one parent who acts as the “confessor” in their lives—the one they go to daily to tell their recurring thoughts and find relief from the guilt those thoughts carry, the one with whom they find acceptance and a sense of safety. From the time Nathan was very little, I played this role in his life. I was also the parent who was most often home to deal with his issues on a daily basis and who researched possible diagnoses and treatments as we worked on understanding him through the years. Consequently, this story is focused on the two of us. Clay was closely involved, of course, as were the rest of our children, but what you will read here is mostly about mother and son and our journey together.

One more thing that might be helpful for you to know is that Nathan is not our only different child. Some of our other kids have struggled with health and mental-health issues, including OCD. But their stories are their own stories

to tell—if they wish—and they are quite capable of telling them. They are not a focus in this book.

So those are the basic facts about us. But they are just the facts. They aren't the story. The purpose of this book is to tell you Nathan's story—and mine. It's the story of how the two of us learned to flourish amidst the glory and challenges of who he was made to be.

A brief note about terminology: In this book we use the word *normal* in the ordinary, colloquial sense. We are aware that this can be a loaded word for some people. But when Nathan was growing up, we were all acutely aware of how different he was from what most people called “normal.” So we have chosen to use the word, without quotation marks, to describe people with more typical or usual behaviors and attitudes, keeping in mind that the line between different and normal can be a blurry one.

Being Nathan's mother taught me so much about what really matters in life. It taught me how to see people through a different lens, to appreciate and validate the variety and differences of people without casting judgment on the ways they differ from me. I grew to become a healthier person as I came to understand and practice living well with the miraculous gift of Nathan in my life.

But I confess that I often felt alone as I struggled through this journey. I didn't have much in the way of a support system. Rarely did I meet someone who had the time to empathize with my story or help me figure out my puzzle—even Clay did not fully comprehend Nathan's issues or diagnosis

for many years—and often I did not have a clue how to access Nathan’s bigger-than-life issues. And so much of the advice that was proffered to me was inadequate at best and insulting at worst.

Nathan grew up before support groups, testing, counseling, and help in these areas were as available as they are today. As a result, I often walked in darkness, depressive thoughts swirling deep inside as I struggled to find a way to reach my son and to accept and cope with both his limitations and my own.

This sense of being on my own, trying to figure out this walk through an unlit hallway, followed me through many years. And I have learned that this isn’t unusual, even today. Many parents of different children journey through baffling days, months, and years before they discover and accurately diagnose their children’s issues, so feeling alone and incompetent is typical. If that’s where you find yourself, I hope that our story will help in some small measure. If you are raising a child who consistently pushes your buttons, whose behavior and motivations often baffle you, whose personality and emotional issues differ significantly from the norm, we hope you will find companionship and understanding here.

This is not really a how-to book, however; nor is it a “how to get it fixed” book. It does not delve into diagnostic issues, weigh the pros and cons of medications, or tell you what kind of counselors to seek—although I assure you we have run the gamut of input and considered every possible approach.

Some of what we learned is sprinkled through the book as part of our story. But this is not a medical treatise, and we are not writing to point you to one more formula, one more way of limiting what you eat, or one more set of natural products to “solve the problem.” We are simply sharing what happened to us in hopes that it will help others who travel a similar road.

This journey has been a true adventure for Nathan and me. We faced challenge and danger, but we also encountered love and grace at every turn of the path. As in all the areas of our lives, we walked it hand in hand with God, asking for wisdom, seeking grace, and growing in understanding. He is the true hero of our story, and we pray you will find His companionship worthy of your trust in your own story. May the same also be true for those you love as you come to terms with what *different* means in your life.

If you have ever felt unaccepted for who you are, it is our hope that this book will help you feel validated, accepted, and affirmed for being unique, for having a distinctive life story.

If you live with a “different” person and share his or her struggle, we hope you will find strength, understanding, and perhaps some helpful strategies.

Whoever you are, we hope you will find grace for the ways you and those you love are different and outside the box.

In our story of hope, may you find hope for your own story as well.

CHAPTER 1

# *I'm Different*

.....

Learning to See and Celebrate  
God's Fingerprints in Our Lives

## **NATHAN**

I've always known I was different. It wasn't something I chose or an identity I one day decided to wear. Being different is woven into the very fabric of who I am. Part of it comes from the various "disorders" that have challenged me and my family, and part of it simply comes from the outside-the-box personality God decided to give me.

Being different has made itself evident in every corner of my life, peeking out and reminding me whenever I start to think I might be normal.

I know I'm different because when other children were content with walking on the sidewalk, I felt the need to climb

the rails. Because when others' questions would stop, mine seemed to go on without end, often frustrating those who ran out of answers.

I know I'm different because when I was fifteen I began taking six showers a day and washing my hands until they bled.

I know I'm different because my mind seems to change channels at will, making it nearly impossible to focus on any one thing for more than a few minutes.

I know I'm different because no matter how hard I looked at the math problem or how many times my tutor explained it, my mind simply couldn't grasp the simple numerical basics that seemed to come so easy to my friends and siblings.

I know I'm different because while I long for affection, I am often scared to touch the ones I love for fear of contaminating them.

I know I'm different because even now as a twenty-seven-year-old adult, there are times when the weight of the world seems so heavy I don't feel able to leave my apartment.

I know I'm different because I've been told so by every important person in my life.

## *Sally*

“Do you just try to be different?” That was one of the most familiar phrases of my childhood and youth and even into my adulthood—though I was not consciously aware of this until I pondered my life while trying to figure out Nathan's.

The message wasn't *I love your uniqueness, your individualism.*

It was *Why can't you just fit in?*

"Since you are so pale and blond, you will have to try harder to have color in your face. You will need to wear mascara and lipstick every day to look beautiful."

"Are you watching your weight? And when was your last haircut?"

"That's a strange thing to say. Why would you even think that?"

"You try to think up every weird ideal and decision to pursue—just to embarrass our family."

These messages and others like them were the foundation of my psyche as a girl growing up. After I became an adult, the criticism was more often implied than spoken, but I heard it loud and clear: "Please don't tell my friends about the books you have written. Your values are a little bit 'out there,' and we wouldn't want to give anyone the wrong impression."

And the theme of all this communication was *You're different—and that's not okay.*

I was not *trying* to be different. I just was. I thought differently. I questioned things as they were. School bored me. I bounced my foot nervously during church and probably talked too much. I was definitely a little wild and dramatically idealistic in my values and dreams. And that made some of my family uncomfortable. They wanted me to fit in.

I realize now that I was probably one of those children

who today would be diagnosed with an alphabet's worth of letters—ADHD, OCD, perhaps a couple of other *Ds*. Those terms are part of my daily vocabulary now, but that wasn't true back then. My parents certainly weren't informed of such things. There were fewer resources and less understanding of learning issues and mental illness. And of course I had no idea these issues framed my life. I only knew that I frustrated others from time to time by just being myself.

So I just muddled through. Because of training and peer pressure to conform, I managed (mostly) to hide my differences. Looking back through the corridors of my life, I now realize that I “stuffed” and suppressed my feelings and learned how to pull back so other people would accept me. I learned to avoid the conflict of being misunderstood *again*. Only much later, through time and experience and especially Nathan, would I come to a different understanding about being different.

I am writing this from the haven of my small, covered deck, sipping my cup of hot tea as I gaze out at tall pines swaying in the whispering wind. Yes, I'm out here again. Being outdoors is one of the best ways I know to find peace for my always active mind. And life is good, because finally I feel at ease in my own skin. I have come to actually like who I am, at least most of the time. But the journey of liking who I am, as I am, with all my strengths, passions, flaws, and imperfections, has been a long journey. It has taken most of my life.

I have always had secret dreams, pleasures, and ideas

bubbling inside me as well as an adventuresome spirit—a willingness to take risks, to experience life at its fullest, to question hypocrisy, and to point it out when others kept silent. All this plus a larger-than-life personality type meant I was often just too much for some of my family, though others in my world of friends loved the “bigness” of who I was.

My sweet mama, especially, struggled to cope with what I was like. She was a devoted and loving mama, but it took me years to understand that she was probably insecure and terrified that I might do something that would bring her criticism from her family or friends. *I* wasn't the one with a problem, in other words. *She* was. She had no idea how to accept me and to validate the person I was on a daily basis.

Let me add that I am long past blaming my parents and especially my mother. She did the best she could within the limits of her own perspective. She was a generous person, and she gave me a love for life in many areas where she felt comfortable. She also (inadvertently) taught me a valuable lesson that has served me well as a mama—that it is easy for parents to pass on unnecessary guilt, shame, and insecurity to their children because we fear the rejection of critical and judgmental people in our lives. So if I can help other parents understand the profound importance of accepting children as they are, perhaps I can save those children from some of the anguish I felt for many years.

There are an infinite number of ways to be different and to feel like one doesn't fit in. The difference can be personality

driven. It can involve physiological issues, mental illness, or emotional issues, and can be shaped by experience. (Nathan's case, it turned out, did involve several clinical disorders as well as a number of personality quirks that set him apart from the crowd.) And feeling different—being different—is something our culture, especially our Christian culture, does not talk about much. People often turn their heads away from people and situations they don't understand and pretend they do not exist. And the words "mental illness" can make them positively squirm.

But the truth is, *all of us are a little bit quirky in some way or another*. All of us have Achilles' heels, uniquely vulnerable areas of our bodies, minds, and personalities. And some of us, to be honest, are a little quirkiest than others—which is why we struggle so much and why other people—especially parents, teachers, and authority figures—have a hard time dealing with us. We are not convenient to their expectations of how life ought to play itself out.

But these personality differences, these outside-the-box preferences and approaches to life, don't have to be liabilities. Or they don't have to be *only* liabilities. They can actually be a gift to us and to others who are willing to look at life through our unique lenses.

Through my years I have discovered that most of us hide a great deal of who we are deep inside, fearing to reveal our flaws, our failures, our weaknesses, our wildness, and especially our "craziness," because we do not want to be rejected by others. Peer pressure and the voices of authority teach us

that we should conform to the boxes of cultural expectations because it will save us from criticism.

Yet psychologists know that “stuffing” our real feelings and thoughts only produces havoc in our bodies, hearts, and minds. Learning to love ourselves, to be humble enough to admit our limitations, to truly appreciate the gifts our differences bring while also being willing to accept help and healing for the most painful ones, gives us greater mental, emotional, and spiritual health.

God made each of us with a unique set of “fingerprints”—our basic personality, physical makeup, and mental capacity, not to mention our God-given spirit. And we each face a unique set of life circumstances—health issues, teaching and modeling, experiences such as success and failure, nurture and abuse. All of these shape our unique story, which often defines our external behavior. But even in this broken world, where our differences often come with burdensome baggage, the imprint of God on our lives still gives value to each one of us as we are.

We are so often encouraged to fit into the boxes of academic achievement, intellectual prowess, recognizable achievements, personality profiles, status, money, power, external significance—to perform, to fit in the box, to be acceptable. Yet our wonderful God loves us unconditionally, now and forever. We do not have to work to please Him. He values us for what is inside our hearts—our character and integrity, our ability to love, to be faithful, to help others, and to show compassion. Our individual personalities are a

gift of His design so that we might add color and variety to the world. And He can use our unique combination of circumstances—even the painful ones like mental illness—for our good and His glory.

Perhaps my own background of feeling inadequate for being “me” prepared me, at least a little, for the gift of my own outside-the-box boy, Nathan. Because I always wanted someone to know me and still love me—to actually *like* me as I was—I was predisposed to champion him with all of his differences.

But that doesn’t mean it was easy! Far from it.

In fact, God must have a sense of humor because he gave me the gift of a little boy who was *really* different. A boy whose outsized needs and over-the-top behavior would test the far limits of my love, challenge my desire to have a heart of compassion, force my ability to live slowly and patiently, and defy my ability to tame or control my circumstances.

Nathan’s differences stretched me and challenged my own limits of wanting to fit in, to not bring more criticism and judgment, and my deep desire to have life be controllable. By loving him through the peaks and valleys of his own life journey in our home, I learned even more the meaning of the preciousness and value of each human being, who is crafted mysteriously by the hands of God. I learned to appreciate and celebrate difference (not just “cope with it”) because all human beings are a work of the Artist and have infinite value to the One who made them.