

# *chapter III.*

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## The Letters: The Early Months

*“If emotions were allowed to rule us, I would be completely insane by now.” (Lori)*

*January 26, 2001 (the very first email)*

Dear Mike,

Hello. I am Lori Thomas, mom of James, who is one of Lindsay’s students. Lindsay is more than a teacher to us. She is family, and I do not know what we would do without her. James and Lindsay have an incredible bond, and we all love her. That, however, is not why I am writing to you.

Our family has just taken in a new foster son, Jonathon. He has a clear attachment disorder, and is very defiant. He will be five years old in June, and this is his fourth home. He was with birth mom and assorted family members for the first two-and-a-half years of his life. He then was given up for adoption, and was placed in a foster home. He remained there for nine months. He was then placed in an adoptive home, and that adoption disrupted. He was with that family for ten months.

I met the adoptive mom, and have nothing good to say about her. She appears to be a very cold, controlling person. She previously adopted a baby from India, and that child is now two. Her bond with her quiet little girl is clear. She does not understand why it was so hard to take in a 3-1/2-year-old (Jonathon), and bond with him. Jonathon is busy and loud. He is taking Adderall for diagnosed ADHD. She wanted a passive child, and wanted him to learn to play violin. She placed him in a Catholic Child Development Center for full-time childcare. The reports

from that school show (to me) that the school staff developed a clear dislike for Jonathon. Rather than reporting his activities objectively, they used words like, "He delights in tormenting the other children." I do not think this poor little boy was accepted by anyone in his last placement. They all wanted him to be someone else.

The reports from his previous foster family show a very busy, sometimes defiant little guy. The extreme aggression that was reported in his adoptive home was not seen in his previous foster placement. We have not seen it here, either. What we do see is a confused child who really wants to control his environment. (He needs to control something in his life.) He does not obey if it does not please him.

Jonathon met us last Wednesday at an agency. He was brought there by his adoptive mom. After a short visit, my husband (Paul) and the adoptive mom went downstairs to move Jonathon's belongings from her car to ours. Jonathon looked at me and asked, "Where did Dad go? I thought I was getting a dad!" No mention of the mom, who also left. When they returned, he hugged Paul. He asked me, a bit later, what he should call me. I told him he had choices. He could call me Mrs. Thomas, or Miss Lori. When he wanted to, he could call me Mom. He said, "OK, Mom, let's go home."

Jonathon loves to hug, and wants to be held often. Of course, I am happy to accommodate. He has told me three times that he knows that when he is bad, we will send him away. He refers to himself as stupid and bad. I have told him that he is wonderful, smart and good. I told him that all of us have bad things we do sometimes, but that does not make us bad. Those are just mistakes, and we learn from them.

Yesterday I had to run out for a short errand, and left Jonathon with Rebecca, my 16-year-old. He was fine with me leaving but, when I came back, he ran up the stairs, hugged me, and said, "Mom! I knew you would come back!" I wanted to cry.

Jonathon's future is uncertain. There was a family lined up to adopt him, and he was to stay here for a month or two while they settled into their new home. They seem to have changed their mind, and have not met Jonathon. He is welcome to stay here as long as necessary, but we have mixed feelings about proceeding to adopt him, ourselves. ("Mixed" means that I want to, and Paul is concerned.) We have five children, and are in the process of adopting a sibling group. We have not met them yet, and do not know for certain that this will take place. Our current permanent children are:

Joshua, age 19  
Rebecca, age 16  
Patrick, age 13  
Maggie, age 10  
James, age 8

Maggie and James are adopted from Korea. The others are birth children. James has special needs, and is a very wonderful little boy. He was adopted at the age of 18 months, and has far exceeded doctors' predictions. He is a loving, sweet, busy boy. Maggie was adopted at almost seven years of age. She is terrific. There was a difficult transition with her, which we expected. She is now doing great, and we have all bonded very well.

None of our experiences have prepared us for Jonathon. We really need advice. We want to help him but have not been able to commit to him as his forever family. What can we do, at this point, without making promises to him that we cannot keep?

Any ideas? I really think Jonathon will be here for a while, and want to do all I can for him. Any advice you can give will be greatly appreciated.

Thank you so much,  
Lori

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*January 27, 2001*

Dear Lori,

You certainly hit the nail on the head when you say you understand that Jonathon's controlling manner results from his having been able to control so little in his years. You seem to be asking:

1. whether his behavior with you right now is predictive of what his behavior is going to be in coming months and years;
2. whether there is something insidious in him that might emerge later;
3. whether you should be as thrilled as you are when he seems to be showing signs of attachment to you;
4. whether the disrupted placements hide secrets about Jonathon

(or is it about the families, you must be wondering?!) that explain why he doesn't stay anywhere permanently.

I doubt that you need me to tell you that those are all legitimate concerns. The answers to all of your questions lie hidden in the answers (not all of which are accessible to us) to these additional questions:

1. What was his prenatal life like? (Was there domestic violence? Did his mom think of aborting him? Did she have predictions about the baby inside of her? Did she drink, use drugs, smoke, rage, eat properly, get prenatal care? Was she depressed? Did she want him?)
2. What was the birth like? Did mom know what she wanted to do about this baby, as the birth was progressing?
3. What is his genetic makeup (responsible, in most cases, for 46–51% of traits)? How have any genetic tendencies (for withdrawal, for aggression, for helplessness, for demandingness, etc.) interacted with his lived experience (of being unwanted, of being held or of being rarely touched, of having his dependency needs met or of being ignored, etc.)?
4. What were those 2-1/2 years with his birth family like? Did he have stable care, absent any losses or separations, from a very small group of primary caregivers who were irrationally in love with him? How stimulating was his world? How chaotic was his world? What were the family's beliefs about rocking, breastfeeding, responding to nighttime crying or terrors, holding and caressing—and what were their behaviors in these areas?
5. Why, ultimately, did he end up available for adoption?

Many of the questions above would also apply to the placements he experienced before coming to your home. What caused each of those disruptions? Was loss starting to become familiar to Jonathon? More specifically, had he given up on attachment?

Only by understanding the answers to these questions—and many more like them—is there any hope of really predicting what it will be like for you and Paul to take him into your home, and hearts.

His behavior on the day he came to you (when he asked about Paul, but not about the adoptive mother) may indicate that he finds safety in your family, and did not in the former one. On the other hand, it may indicate that he makes transitions suddenly, does not look back, that he is

promiscuous in his attachments (which are, by definition, then, superficial and self-serving). He may allow himself to fall into the bosom of the family, and change his mind about the narrative he had probably already written for his life. On the other hand, he may seem to be heading in that direction, only to respond shockingly to something as minor as seeing a lady at K-Mart that reminds him of his birthmother, or your family going on a trip (which makes him think of loss), or someone inadvertently hurting him (which could send him into a rage, the likes of which you have never seen).

I am glad to learn that your children are all older than Jonathon, as kids with his background often have profound tendencies to hurt children and animals smaller or younger than they are. So he may not be a physical danger to the rest of your family, at least for now. One of your other children may, however, tell you that he “sucks all the air out of the room”—meaning that the unpredictability of his behavior, or the chronicity of his behavior, or his constantly needing you to be “watching” him, or his tendency to create a swirl of chaos around him, may start wearing people out (your other kids, you, Paul).

On the other hand, it is just this sort of child that pulls our heart-strings the most, sometimes. There SEEMS to be so little wrong with him. Perhaps he will respond to love, and stability, and being valued. You can see how horribly he has been jerked around. Maybe you can even see that his behavior is not all that crazy, that it rather fits the story of his life. (For example: that he fights back against intimacy, because he is afraid he will lose it. Or that he will cuddle up to just about anyone, as if it really doesn't matter to whom he becomes attached. Or that he will fly into rages when he is injured or afraid, or even embarrassed, because he has had no defense against just those things in the past.)

Does he need you? Oh, goodness, that's the awful question. Of course he does. Big time. And certainly, as his placement history indicates, homes that could sustain themselves in the face of him and survive, homes that have what he needs, are few and far between. It will take a rare stamina to keep up with his needs and to keep your heads above water. But there is little that can save him EXCEPT what you have to offer. This doesn't mean you have to offer it, of course; you have to also be thoughtful about the many others who need you. (I suspect this is one of the things that gives Paul pause.) But he does need what you have.

I would be glad to share my film\* (on the subject of children like Jonathon) with you, and I would also be glad to suggest other resources—readings, therapies, newsletters, etc.—but I don't want to overburden you

right away. And yes, because I, like you, love and trust Lindsay, I would make myself available for occasional consults like this one. My thoughts will be with you.

Michael Trout

\*"Multiple Transitions: A Young Child's Point of View on Foster Care and Adoption", 16 minutes, VHS, produced by Michael Trout, available from The Infant-Parent Institute, 328 North Neil Street, Champaign, Illinois 61820 USA; tel: 217-352-4060; email: mtrout@infant-parent.com.

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*January 28, 2001*

Dear Michael,

Thank you so much for your very thoughtful response to my plea for help! We really appreciate the fact that you have shared your time and expertise with us. You cannot imagine how timely your information was. Our "testing phase" has clearly begun.

You gave us a lot to digest. I know so little of Jonathon's past. Prenatal life: I know that Jonathon's birth mom was single, and 21. She had two elective abortions before he came along. There is nothing in the reports to suggest that she considered aborting him, but with her history I have to think that she might have struggled with that decision. There was no evidence or admission of drug or alcohol use during pregnancy.

Birth mom did keep Jonathon (more or less) for 2-1/2 years, rather than give him up at birth. To me, that suggests that she wanted him, but my mind and hers may not follow the same logic. And records indicate that Jonathon spent time with many different family members during those first 2-1/2 years.

Jonathon's birth mom went in for counseling, with the intention of giving him up for adoption, at around the time of his second birthday. She received help for 6 months, trying to learn to effectively parent him. After the 6 months, she stated that she was afraid that she would hurt him, and decided the time had come to relinquish parental rights.

Members of Jonathon's first foster family state that they really loved their time with him. He slept with a teenage foster brother, and did a lot of "male-bonding" there. Wrestling and roughhousing. That family

included three sons (all older teens) one daughter (about 12, then) and a mom and a dad. There are photos of Jonathon sleeping on foster brother's chest. I think that his time there provided him a great deal of love.

His next family—the to-be adoptive family—did not seem like warm and cuddly types. They are a quiet, non-athletic, serene family. They wanted him to play violin and piano. When he frustrated them, they enrolled him in a strict, Catholic child-care center. He was there from 9 to 5, five days a week. Jonathon is a wild-child. Not a violin player type. To say the least, he was more the football player type.

Jonathon's behavior the past 24 hours has been pretty horrible: hiding from Paul, biting Rebecca, kicking and hitting. He has only acted this way towards the adult, authority figures. He has not hurt other children, or the dogs. In fact, he is very sensitive to Sugar, our very sick older dog. He refers to her as our broken dog, and he is very gentle with her.

Right now, all I want to do is hold Jonathon, rock him, and cry. I mourn for all he has suffered, and how that suffering causes all of us to suffer now. What has happened to him is so unfair. Life is not fair, but I hate that it can be SO unfair to a child. We will view the video that you sent, and devour any information that we can get our hands on, and pray.

Lindsay is indeed quite a special person in every respect. Her love for children, and especially for the special children of this world, is so clear in all that she does. We adore her.

I cannot tell you how much we appreciate your help. We know that Jonathon is special, and want to do everything we can to help him succeed.

From the bottom of our hearts, thank you,  
Lori

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*January 29, 2001*

Dear Lori,

Just a couple of thoughts, after reading your last communication:

- A. What you had to say about his experience with being moved/jostled with/cuddled by the teen foster brother—then seriously frustrated in all of those areas in the subsequent adoptive home—is very important. I'm glad you know this, and that it means something to you.

For more documentation, and stories, about the extraordinary role played by these needs many boys have, you might want to take a look at *Real Boys*, a book by William Pollack. There are times when my youngest son (an 8-year-old adoptee with a horrid beginning) begs me to wrestle him—which usually does not actually mean “wrestling” in the customary sense but, rather, refers to his wish that I cuddle him hard, “squish” him (sort of like lying on him, often using a blanket), or pick him up. Sometimes he hates this; at other times, it is exactly what he wants, and seems to need. Kids like this often hate and mistrust their brains, and stay way out of touch with their hearts; but they can sometimes relax into pure motor activity, and even like to be overpowered (surprisingly).

- B. Your observations about his not being a danger to small animals is important. While this is not an absolute, it is generally the case that children with attachment problems who are NOT violent with animals tend to NOT have full-blown, classic RAD (Reactive Attachment Disorder). This is extremely good news, potentially suggesting that he may be capable of human connections, that he may be able to rise above manipulative and superficial relationships.
- C. There is a sense in which, of course, it is good that he is acting out. “Acting in” can be worse (tho’ easier for parents to handle), as it usually leads either to serious clinical depression, or rage, or both. He is fighting for his life; he is fighting for psychological survival. It ain’t pretty, and it is very difficult to hold on. And (I’ll bet you have already guessed this) it may well get lots worse before it gets better. For the healthiest of these children (in other words: the ones who actually do have a soul, who are capable of love and connection), the terror approaches intolerability as they know more of the reliability of your love. It’s an awful irony, I know: the better parents you are, the more you comfort him and allow him the opportunity to trust you, the worse his fear—and, therefore, his behavior—will get. If he has the inner workings of a full human being, there will be an end to this. It just won’t happen fast, and it probably won’t happen all at once but, rather, in frustrating fits and starts. (Just as you think things are getting better, he will devastate you with another meltdown.)

I hope this is not too much information/feedback, too fast. Your email was just so rich, I had to comment a little.

*January 30, 2001*

Michael,

Thank you again for another timely response. You cannot imagine how much it meant to me last night to open my e-mails and have your information waiting.

Jonathon had a great day yesterday. We had a fairly quiet, unstructured day of play. No problems until...

Paul took Jonathon to a wrestling practice last night, which is an activity he loves. Jonathon and a 6-year-old girl usually wrestle together, and do quite well playing—until last night. They were rolling a roll of tape back and forth to each other, and then the little girl decided to keep it. Paul said that, in a matter of seconds, Jonathon had his sweater off and was hitting her with it as she cowered in a corner. She was crying, he was screaming. Paul immediately brought Jonathon home, and then returned to the practice.

Jonathon was crying loudly, and was very angry that Dad made him "... drop these wet tears on my face." His first words were about himself. "I wanted to stay there and play." "Dad is mean to me. You are mean, too. I want to go to another family." "I want to go back and play." He then moved into a remorse mode. "I don't want to be mean to my friends. I don't want to hurt them. She didn't let me say sorry. I want to say sorry." By this time, I was holding him tightly. He was lying on the couch, and I was next to him, wrapped around him. After his period of remorse, his sobbing became intense. His next words were: "I miss Ann. I want Ann." Ann is one of the nuns who worked with him at his daycare, and she is the one who wrote notes home daily. The notes were never objective, but full of obvious dislike for Jonathon, with phrases like, "He delights in tormenting..." and "He had another rotten day..." in every note. I cannot imagine, based on these notes, that there was much warmth in their relationship. In any case, Jonathon was crying about losing her. His next words were heartbreaking. "Why didn't she want me, Mom? Why didn't she want me?"

During last night's episode, I did not say much. I continued to hold him and rock him. When he would stop crying for a moment, I would say, "I love you, Jonathon." That was all I had to offer. I did not have answers for him, and did not feel he wanted any, anyway. He just needed to express his feelings and unload.

When Paul returned, he reported that the little girl would love to give Jonathon another chance, and still wanted to play with him again on Wednesday. Jonathon seemed happy to hear this. I suggested that he draw her a picture, and that he could try to be really nice next time. I said that he could come and tell us if he has problems, in the future.

After our bedtime ritual (which we did not follow closely one time, and we paid the price), I came in to read my e-mails, and there you were! It was such an encouragement, at a time when I was really drained. I think that Paul and I might need to get used to feeling drained! Seems to be a common occurrence these days. We are being stretched, and we are learning from it.

When Paul went back to the wrestling room last night, one of the other fathers reminded him of Helen Keller, her fits and frustration, and how she responded in time. It was good to hear another father who was willing to encourage Paul. He needed it!

Thanks again for everything!

Lori

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*February 1, 2001*

Michael,

I just had a few thoughts that I wanted to pass along. Paul, Rebecca and I watched your video ["Multiple Transitions: A Young Child's Point of View on Foster Care and Adoption"—Ed.] two nights ago. Thank you for producing it, and for sharing it with us. As I reflected on it, I realized that much in there has been felt in this home already, and we have only had Jonathon for two weeks! I have heard Jonathon express some of those feelings, and felt the others with him. I do not know how to explain it, except to say that those thoughts are so strong that they manifest themselves very quickly. The depth of despair in these children is incredible.

We have already seen and raised so many children that I thought we had seen everything. Boy, was I wrong. At the same time, the fact that we have had a lot of experience parenting will help us through this. I really feel for parents who might be experiencing this with their first child.

James' original prognosis was very dire. (He is our adopted child from Korea, whom we share with Lindsay, as you are probably aware. She considers him hers, too. We love it that she loves him so.) James' diagnoses include autism, fetal alcohol syndrome, mild cerebral palsy, microcephaly, atrophied cerebellum, and Tourette's Syndrome. As a result of those problems, of course, we have others: seizure activity, mental retardation, speech delay, small motor difficulties. When we first met James (we lived in Korea at the time) we brought him into our home and took him to our American doctors. They advised against adoption, and told us that his chances of bonding, learning, speaking, walking, and the like were not good. James has proven them wrong. He is a walking, running, loving, busy boy. He brings happiness to more people than the rest of my family, combined, could ever do. He just touches people's hearts in incredible ways.

I know that I am mixing apples and oranges, and that I should be careful about doing that, but James' progress gives me more hope for Jonathon. The human spirit is strong, and God's power is even stronger.

If I can ever help to encourage other parents, I would be happy to do so. I know that our path, and struggle, with Jonathon is just beginning. I understand (fearfully) that things will get worse before they get better. And then maybe they will get worse again. I do not have any clue how we will do as we go through these times. I hope to learn as we go. However, I have seen incredible miracles in other children, and would be happy to share that encouraging word with others.

A quick question: Do you know of any books that tell the story of people with attachment disorders who went on to live productive lives? That would be nice reading right now. I thought of *A Child Called It*, *The Lost Boy*, and *A Man Called Dave*. I devoured those books last year, and have to think that the character in them must have had attachment problems. I think I will re-read them.

Thanks again for all of your help.

Very appreciatively,  
Lori

*February 4, 2001*

Dear Lori,

I had the oddest thought after reading your latest communication. In just these few days, we have talked about a great many important things, while a process takes hold in your family that has included anticipation, fear, faith, wonderment, terror, hope, prognostication. It dawns on me—imagining another parent in your position reading what we have said to each other—that these exchanges (should they continue) might be a source of information and inspiration to others. This would most assuredly remain the case if these exchanges included stories of everything going sour, or of the placement collapsing; in other words, their use would NOT be dependent on their having a “happy ending”. In any case, I’m going to retain copies of what we have said to each other, and may someday come back to you with an idea...

The author of the books you mentioned (Dave Pelzer), and I, spoke at the same conference, in Detroit, a year or so ago. While Dave’s experience was certainly horrific, I suspect it differs in some respects from the experience you are going to have with Jonathon. His was, in some respects, from a “normal” family. They had resources, two parents, employment, and the cover of neighborhood and community. Dave got out by the skin of his teeth, but at an advanced age, and after developing profound inner resources to cope. Jonathon, and thousands of other little ones like him, certainly developed inner resources to cope with their pain, but these were largely primitive resources (dissociation, hardening, development of a “false self”, etc.) that helped them to avoid further pain and to attract alternative care. It’s a tough call to say whose situation is “worse”; that’s a comparison it seems inhumane to make. In terms of the seriousness of the internal damage, however, it seems likely that the Daves of the world have a better chance.

With respect to your question about a book that suggests a happy outcome, I might suggest that you contact The Attachment Center at Evergreen in Colorado [now known as the Institute for Attachment and Child Development]. They have a newsletter worth subscribing to, and can put you in touch with suggested readings and other resources. Perhaps I will send you some materials tomorrow, when I get to the office, which might give you some additional ideas.

Your comparison of James and Jonathon reminds me of my own struggle, with the families that come to me, to understand (sometimes retrospectively) what happened to a particular child, so we can know whether he will turn out to be a James, or a Jonathon, or yet another type of child. The answers lie in all of those questions I posed to you in one of my first communications. It is simply astonishing, sometimes, to see what a huge difference is made by something seemingly minor in the history. I am presently working with a couple that adopted two boys from the same orphanage in the Philippines, at the same time, at the same age. They were not brothers, but most all the superficial data about their backgrounds was similar. Now, at age 14, they could not possibly resemble each other less. One is happy, competent, and self-confident. The other is morose, angry, and absolutely lacking in any strong sense of self. The parents were at a loss to understand this, until they began to consider seriously this difference: the depressed child came to America with no one, and began screaming the minute he was placed in his adoptive mother's arms. He could not be comforted. The other child was accompanied to America (on the very same plane) by a young girl who had looked after him in the Philippine orphanage. The adoptive parents liked her so much that they invited her to stay with them—for 2 1/2 years! She continued to be this child's surrogate "mother", and slowly transitioned out of the family when he was a happy and secure two-year-old.

My best to you and Paul,  
Michael Trout

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*February 5, 2001*

Michael,

I would be thrilled to have these exchanges continue, and for them to be used in a way to help others in the future!

Saturday evening I escaped to Barnes and Noble, one of my favorite spots in the whole world. I needed to escape to recharge myself. I found *Real Boys*, as you recommended, as well as *The Things I Want Most*, by Richard Minitier, and *Orphan*, by Roger Dean Kiser, Sr. Maybe I am drawn to them because the characters in them, like Dave, seem to come out okay. I want that to be our ending, too.

Jonathon is sick today: high fever, flu symptoms. He is so sweet and cuddly. I do not want him to be sick, by I am enjoying the time to hold him and know him as a quiet child. Is this the child that, properly treated, he could be, full-time? I really like this child!

It is impossible to not love Jonathon. He has been through so much, and is so needy, and he needs to be loved. Therefore, we love him. And he does have truly loveable moments. Sometimes, however, he makes it very hard to like him. Love is a decision; like is an emotion. Like is harder. Today, I like Jonathon. I want to always like him.

Lori

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*February 5, 2001*

Dear Lori,

I was going to send you a couple of newsletters that will help you to know of some of the resources out there, and realized I did not have your mailing address.

Would Paul ever feel comfortable chatting a bit about how all of this is for him? I don't mean to be intrusive, but I also don't want to bypass, overlook or in any way discount him. If we continue this episodic consulting, it seems that I ought to "know" him a little, and he me.

Michael Trout

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*February 6, 2001*

Michael,

Lori has kept me up-to-date on her correspondence with you, and I would be happy to chip in with my thoughts.

Let me start by stating that I believe Jonathon has many positive character traits. They are his engaging personality, often-friendly disposition, and loving attitude toward animals, among others. He also has some sig-

nificant flaws: unrepentant attitude after disobedience, willfulness in pursuit of his desires, and a tendency towards tantrums and physical exhibition of displeasure, among others.

Jonathon started out with about 24 hours of good behavior, and then moved into a phase of direct confrontation. He generally chose to battle over parental direction to end an activity that he wanted to continue. Jonathon would ignore direction and, when pressed, seek to get away from the parent. In each instance I was able to immediately catch him and impose my will. He realized after about 19 days that that approach would not work.

Once the intermittent, overt defiance ended (at least for now), Jonathon switched to more subtle methods. For instance, he will pretend that he does not hear direction, or will put on an angry face and sulk. He also tries to win little battles, such as not eating his food or not picking up messes. I try to be consistent and clearly state the rules, but am forgiving once he shows he understands. Jonathon is already much more able to take direction, and reacts positively to “no”.

I have worked hard to get him to cuddle. At first his only physical contact with me was in the form of “wrestling” (generally well-controlled). Now he is much more willing to sit on my lap to watch a show.

I am now trying to get him to let go of things, rather than ask for things over and over. For example, when we are getting close to dinner, he starts saying he is hungry, every 2 minutes or so. I want him to eat dinner, so ask him to wait. So far, little progress.

Hope this is helpful,  
Paul

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*February 14, 2001*

Dear Michael,

Just a quick note to let you know how things are going here. First, let me thank you for sending those newsletters. They are very helpful. We have been devouring any information we find... on the web, in those newsletters.