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Launching Amory

Mill Wallace

I always liked Ed. He was one of the few Rectors, of the many I have met, who placed the congregants first. It meant a lot that he showed up when my daughter was born. Ed asked to hold her as my wife rested in that old downtown hospital where I attempted to grab a few precious bits of study time before the newborn awoke for another feeding.

It was the spring of 1988 and I was finishing up graduate school. My wife had supported me for two years of full-time graduate work and our first child was born a month before my graduation. I could always joke with Ed; we jostled a familiar banter that I've failed to duplicate with other priests.

"That's a quiet baby. She's staring at me."

"Do you think she knows you're responsible for her soul and she's trying to get on your good side?"

"No, she's probably never seen a clerical collar; it's a strange looking vestment" said Ed. "Has she been sleeping well or have you been up all night?"

Not wanting to complain, I deflected the question. "When she won't sleep, I just hang her, feet first, from the closet rod."

Knowing my acerbic sense of humor, Ed pulled the blanket from around her lower torso and stared at the concave feet of a newborn.

"They're prehensile like a monkey's tail," I said. "She wraps them around the closet rod, hangs upside down, and goes right to sleep."

Ed stared at my daughter's curled feet, noticed my shit-eating grin, and laughed so hard that I thought he would drop the baby.

From that day, I've called her Monkey although her Christian name is Amory. I tell her the simian name was inspired by a Man of God and if she has any complaints about the moniker, she knows who to send grievances to.

A Strong Girl

West Central Ohio was flattened in the Ice Age by the Wisconsin Glacier. I moved the family there following a job transfer. Monkey was two years old during the move. We lived in a two-story colonial in the Miami Valley section of the state. Our yard was a pancake flat half-acre covered with the jungle-weed known as Kentucky Bluegrass. I would struggle, from April through October, to tame the jungle with a five horsepower push mower. I got excited at the possibility of pulling up some of the jungle turf for a brick walkway.

In July, when she was three, Monkey got a baby brother. He was fair-haired with striking blue eyes that latched on to his sister. I nicknamed him The Bud.

They became inseparable. I was starting the walkway, stretching some forty feet from the patio to the driveway, when her brother arrived. I never seemed to time projects well and tried to juggle finishing the walkway while helping my wife with the newborn. When her brother was sleeping, Monkey would wander outside to watch me set bricks in the sand-bed and pound them with a rubber mallet. I would shoo her away citing the danger of three-year old around a construction site. I reached to get a brick only to find I was out and would have to go to the three foot high stack, load a wheel-barrow full, and move them within arm's reach. As I turned, I saw my daughter holding a four pound paver and eager for me to take it from her hands and lay it in the bed.

“Monkey! Where did you get that brick from?”

She knitted her eyebrows and looked at me quizzically; eyes darting on a horizontal plane. “Over on the pile where you get them.”

“You mean you climbed the stack and brought one to me!”

“Yes. You were running out.”

“But you could drop the brick on your foot!” I yelled as I noticed her in a pinafore and sandals.

“Oh don't worry Daddy, I'm a strong girl.”

Rob, the Tooth Fairy's Assistant

As she grew, Monkey and her brother began to explore their Ohio neighborhood. They pushed the boundaries on just about all limits their parents set. I learned that two children are not double the work of one. The work product is cubed. Their mother was at home with them full-time and wrestled with their daily discipline.

I traveled much of the time and, unfamiliar with their mother's instruction, often destroyed her disciplinary rules that had been in place during my absence. I unknowingly began a cycle of endearing myself to the children as a fun seeking rule-breaker. I had a much less positive effect on my wife.

There were times when rules and caution were relaxed and this was usually when the pair invented some new form of play that was entertaining and that my wife had prior experience with. Of note was when, late on a Friday evening, I found Monkey in the foyer eagerly waiting my arrival.

“The Bud and I have something to show you.” she said excitedly.

“What?” I said with the enthusiasm one can muster from a week of meetings and travel topped off by a crowded flight from LaGuardia.

“We learned how to surf.”

“What?”

“Surf.”

I was dead tired and not totally coherent. It was also the middle of winter and

we lived in Ohio. How does one actually surf under these conditions?

“The Bud bounces more than I do because he is shorter and I knocked a tooth loose. See Daddy,” said my daughter while wiggling a lower incisor with her index finger.

I had yet to figure out the surfing when The Bud appeared and began climbing the carpeted stairs. Monkey broke from her conversation and followed him. They laid, side by side, at the top of the stairs with arms to their sides, heads up, necks extended, and ankles together. They bowed their bodies so their mid-sections touched the floor. Counting to three, the pair wiggled like penguins on the ice and launched their bodies down the stairs. They “surfed” over the edge of the stringers and opened their mouths shouting Oh! Their sound reverberated in concussive waves and they crashed into a heap on the landing. They laughed with eyes wide and climbed the stairs to go again.

Later that evening, Monkey became worried about the loose tooth and fretted over the pain of removal. I found it difficult to overcome her trepidations that I could help. The tooth was barely hanging on and I made a move to extract it. Unfortunately, the creative mind that dreamed up surfing fomented great fear of pain from the final stage of pulling the tooth. My daughter locked her jaws and wouldn't go to bed.

Knowing that any appeal to reason was hopeless, I held a late night ceremony to summon the Tooth Fairy who would inhabit my body and painlessly remove the incisor. I lit a candle and began the incantation. Monkey was instructed to place hands over her eyes and do what was asked.

“Oh great and honorable Tooth Fairy” I called. There was silence.

“Where is he Daddy? Is he coming?” Monkey's fingers parted and she peeked.

“Didn't I tell you to cover your eyes and be still?”

“Oh great and honorable Tooth Fairy come and inhabit my body and painlessly remove Monkey's tooth.”

I did my best mimic of a sprite. “Open your eyes little girl.” Monkey did what she was told.

“Daddy, where is the tooth fairy?”

“I am the Tooth Fairy and inhabiting your father's body.” My daughter looked skeptical.

“You must do as you are told or you will suffer the pain of a loose tooth.” The skepticism resided.

“Now repeat after me.”

“The Tooth Fairy is great and good and will remove the tooth without pain.”

“The Tooth Fairy is great and good and will remove the tooth without pain.

Where is my daddy?”

“Your daddy is still here but he cannot speak as I, the Tooth Fairy, am inhabiting

his body.”

“I want to talk to my daddy.”

I gritted my teeth, tried hiding my frustration, and talked between pursed lips. “You can’t talk to your daddy as he is giving his body to me to remove the tooth.”

“Will he get his body back?”

“Yes!” I yelled while coming out of character. I could see that I was losing the battle for her young mind. “Now repeat after me. This tooth will not hurt.”

“This tooth will not hurt.”

“Now open your mouth,” I said. Monkey’s mouth remained shut. “Open your mouth or my assistant will not give you money for your tooth.” Her brow furled and mouth slowly opened. The tooth fell into my hand as I touched it.

Monkey gasped. “It didn’t hurt at all! I didn’t know the Tooth Fairy had an assistant. What does he look like and how much money will I get?”

Surmising the difficult task was done, the Tooth Fairy left my body and I was left, sine spiritu, and addressed my daughter. “His assistant is a girl in a tutu and she looks like Tinkerbell. I don’t know how much money she will leave.”

“Is her tutu like mine, the one I wear for ballet practice?”

“Yes.”

“What color is it?”

“I don’t know. Why does that matter?”

“If it’s pink she is a girly-girl, if it’s blue she dances like a boy, if it’s white she is a real ballerina, and if it’s green she can’t dance.”

“Where did you hear that?”

“Oh Daddy, everybody knows that.”

I realized that trying to reason or out-imagine my daughter was a losing proposition and gave up. The main goal had been accomplished and that night, after placing the tooth under her pillow, the Tooth Fairy’s assistant came and exchanged it for a dollar. The following morning, my daughter proudly displayed the loot along with the gap in her dentition.

“Daddy, the Tooth Fairy’s assistant did visit but it’s not a girl.”

“How do you know that?”

“Cause he left his name on the dollar bill.”

“What?”

“Look,” said my daughter as she stretched the front of the bill for me to see. To left of Washington’s bust was written, in red letters, Rob. “That’s right Daddy, his name is Rob, and I don’t think he wears a tutu.”

Teaching Spanish Kids Spanish

I started a business when Amory was eleven and have been self-employed for

over a decade. I travel often and in-between the away times are blurs of my daughter's middle school through college years. The cross-country races, dating scene, and academic honors seem to meld and are more of vapor and mist than real.

Amory grew into a pretty young woman; proud, determined, and loyal. She is an elementary school teacher in the shadows of a great city where she describes her work as "teaching Spanish kids Spanish." I never questioned her career choice for she told me, while in high-school, that she loved watching children grow and there was something magic about it.

Recently, I helped set up her first apartment. Fathers are good for moving furniture, hanging pictures, and other mechanical needs. Amory lives in a vibrant village of the city and, during my visit, we walked to several trendy restaurants.

During the meals, she prattled on about her new beginnings, college friends, and plans for the future. She is young and life is before her and I tried to envision how it was to feel that way for I am old with experience and my dreams have been ground smooth by the lies of men.

We said goodbye after breakfast at a kitschy restaurant where the middle-aged waitress was Hispanic and had not mastered the vulgate. My daughter ordered for us. The waitress seemed pleased that there was a Spanish speaker and glanced my way and smiled. As I paid the bill at the register, my daughter walked out into a gray day where snow was lightly falling. On the way out, the waitress nabbed my coat sleeve at the elbow. "Ella es hermosa. Las hijas son una bendicion."

Made by Their Maker and Borrowed

My mother is a small town girl from the foothills of North Carolina. She bears great insight but appears simple in a deceiving way and has a habit of repeating herself which makes one wonder if she has a memory problem. She has been a victim of this "memory problem" since I was in elementary school. When Amory and The Bud were born, she couldn't have been happier. She lit up every time we came home to visit. On one occasion, when my wife and I went out of the country, we left the kids with my parents for an extended period. We later learned that "Grandma" had helped them build a boat out of a lounge chair and they "sailed it, all day, down the Atlantic and across the Caribbean," to visit us in Mexico.

I asked Mom about the sailing trip and she intimated that it was no big deal.

For her, playing with grand-children, for hours and on their level, was what normal grand-parents did. But this dedication to children seemed to contrast with one of my mother's repeated sayings. She would tell us that "children are their own persons, made by their maker long before they are born, and parents only borrow them."

Growing up, and trying to fathom my mother's sentiments, made me wonder if

she really wanted my brother and me. But my mother was speaking to my future understanding and I recently grasped what she meant when I was packing up Monkey's American Girl collection and putting it away for storage. As I reached into a box to pack away Felicity's bedroom suite, the carton became cavernous, bottomless, and timeless, and I fell into the darkness and the tears flowed and I could not stop. I have launched Amory into the world and my days of borrowing have ended. I could not have, by my paltry efforts, created something as beautiful as her and my mother was right in that there are ancient things, much greater and more powerful, that craft our children before they are born. Parents are caretakers and stewards of great treasure and it is substantial and regretful irony that many don't realize it until their stewardship is done.

The more I filled the cartons, the more I realized a great emptiness and the remorseful, haunting questions surfaced. Did I spend enough time with her?

Was I a good father? Will she remember me for good things? The questions are summarized by one; did I love her enough?

Wisdom of the Ages

In that small Southern town I grew up in, there are colloquialisms that have dogged me for five decades. When faced with the need for greater understanding, there is a depository of knowledge called the "wisdom of the ages." I understand it to mean that, with proper reflection, answers to life's troubling conditions are proffered from the heart. When I ask myself if I have loved Amory enough, the answer from between the breastplates is at first bitter, then hopeful. For one can never love enough but love doesn't acknowledge time; hence there is no end and always hope. And what is hope if it is not fueled by imagination; brimming with possibility of love renewed and outside of temporal bounds?

I called Amory yesterday. She was back to school after two weeks of Christmas vacation. It seems the kids were rowdy; coming off sugar highs from too many holiday sweets. She felt tired and alone and wondered if her career decision was the right one. I told her that I can, after four decades, remember the names of every one of my elementary school teachers, what they looked like, and the many lessons I learned from them. I told her that teachers are guardians of our future, and the good ones, the ones that last, know this and take great pride and satisfaction in their profession. They are daughters who are blessings to their fathers and the world beyond; strong girls who know the magic of timeless time, the imagination of hope, and have visited with Rob, the Tooth Fairy's assistant, who doesn't wear a tutu.