

Justice in a Jar

Ellen A. Brown

As I watch in disbelief the evening news – as so-called loving and responsible adults are struggling to pull apart one little Cuban boy – I wonder what King Solomon would have said. Sometimes the loving thing to do is to surrender and let go. There cannot be a tug of war if one side lets go. That is the secret to Ghandi's civil disobedience, and for Martin Luther King. It worked for me.

I had to let go of my kids, but it wasn't a defeat, after all. What finally triumphed was the investment I had made; the sum of all my days of devotion – days spent doing routine everyday sorts of things. It is precisely in the dull, repetitive "old faithful" daily chores – of diapering, feeding, observing, helping, guiding, listening, correcting and encouraging that one becomes a parent. And, it is the memory of all these seemingly insignificant acts that registers deep within a child and gives him (or her) the experience of parental love. Sometimes a parent never finds out what the effect of their parenting efforts has been. I've been very lucky, for my children seem to know how much I've cared.

Both children were born in Lynchburg, at the Virginia Baptist Hospital, less than a mile from the Virginia Episcopal School, our home. The school was also home to about 150 adolescent boys, 15-20 dogs and cats, and 25 or so teachers, many of whom had wives and children. There was a noticeable baby boom that started about 1980, a population explosion which forced all sorts of adjustments to campus life. Seated formal meals soon disappeared, a playground was installed, and dorm masters began getting more serious about maintaining quiet hours if there was a baby living in the dorm's faculty apartment.

The students had good manners for the most part and were tolerant of the many campus children. It was always possible to spot a few students who were homesick, for they would hang around the moms and the little guys and brighten if asked about their own brothers and sisters back home. Some didn't mind babysitting, but it was wise to broach the subject discreetly. One student we hired was totally unprepared. I'll always remember his utter bewilderment as he sat on the bed in Kate's room opposite her crib, holding a diaper in his hand, having absolutely no clue if she needed to be changed, and really not wanting to find out.

There were several of us moms who had babies at about the same time, and we had as much fun together as possible. We coordinated our Halloween costumes one year and showed up with five little clowns in tow. We went all out for the Christmas party, with a Santa Claus and an elaborate gift exchange. The school's competitive atmosphere got a little heavy at times, so we tried to initiate a student vs. faculty basketball game at the end of the winter season, with lots of Harlem Globe Trotter silliness at half time and with us wives hamming it up as tacky cheerleaders.

I really did try to contribute to the community. I reestablished a literary magazine (working with some students to edit it and get it published), directed the chorus in *John Brown's Body*, and participated in a faculty singing group. I covered my husband's classes for him when he was sick or had an away tennis match, and I attended many an athletic contest. Otherwise, my time was mostly spent taking the kids back and forth to nursery school and to music lessons or ballet. There did come a time when the school needed me to teach, but never full time, and never on an on-going contractual basis. I think I could have been a heck of a teacher (or an administrator), but it wasn't meant to be.

By 1987, as Kate was finishing up kindergarten and David was signed up for a 5 days a week nursery school, I decided to break out from my boredom (and depression) by joining in an effort to start a free health clinic. That adventure brought me some great new friends and widened my horizons beyond the confines of the sheltered world of VES. We moved away from Lynchburg in 1989 and the kids never again had a "stay-at-home mom," but I had made parenting my top priority during 6-8 of their most critical formative years.

Remember the Alanis Morissette song from a few years ago, *Isn't It Ironic?* (It's like rain on your wedding day, a free ride when you've already paid)? Well, I see irony in much of my life, too. After twelve years living at the Virginia Episcopal School, at the end-of-the-year faculty staff picnic, one dear friend stood up and stated that everyone would remember me, and miss me, for my beautiful singing voice. That comment followed the awarding of a painting, a school chair, and numerous speeches praising and admiring the teaching, coaching, friendship and other contributions of my spouse.

It seems ironic, too, that for the first six months after our arrival in Roanoke, in 1992, with our children adjusting to their new identity as "preacher's kids," and me trying on my job

as “clergy spouse,” that no one had a conversation with me about my experiences as an administrator in Washington. Not only was I no longer an executive director, with an office, a salary and a business card, but I was being defined, again, by my role as spouse.

Another moment of irony came in 1996, when I found myself moving out of our home on the campus of Christ School, in Arden, N.C., to rent an apartment at Turtle Creek, and to be sloughing off my identity as faculty wife, or as any kind of wife, for that matter. To the casual observer, I might have been giving up my role of parent, as well. It was challenging to reinvent myself and to forge a new identity. I remember going to a church service late one afternoon and being invited by some of the members there to stay for a covered dish dinner. I just couldn’t find the courage to stay. I kept thinking about how I would introduce myself, saying. “Hello. I’m Ellen Brown. I used to be the wife of..., I used to live at..., and I have two children, but they don’t live with me.” I couldn’t think of anything positive to say.

That is why I find so much significance in a gift I received from my daughter, in 1998. Here is the letter she wrote:

Dear Mom,

Happy Birthday! On this your 48th, I realize that I am approaching my 18th, the very beginning of adulthood. Enclosed in this jar are thirteen memories. They are each very dear memories and thoughts I hold of you. Twelve are for the twelve months of this year with one extra, in case you ever need to be reminded of my love and admiration for you. I do love you so much and am incredibly thankful to have a mother as patient, loving, compassionate, and wonderful as you! Happy Birthday!

Love Always, Kate

So here, in random order, are Kate’s collected memories, and some of the reflections each of them trigger for me.

I remember...

Day after day, year after year, town after town, you drove me to ballet lessons. You sewed those little bits of elastic into countless pairs of little pink shoes and eventually taught me to sew myself.

In Washington we enrolled Kate in the Washington School of Ballet – a prestigious school but a very competitive and stressful environment for children. We later found the Arlington Center for Dance and preferred it. Kate was just about ready to go “on toe” when we had to move away.

I remember...

SKATE-WALKS!!!

Socks was so new to us. Sometimes I'd hold the leash and allow myself to be pulled along behind her. Sometimes she'd run ahead (she always HAD to be the leader) and your hand would always be there for balance.

Sometimes after getting home to Alexandria after my commute from D.C., Kate and I would go for a walk together – usually with the dog, and often with Kate wearing her skates. (roller blades). My job was stressful and draining, and I was always so glad to get home to the kids and to get focused on their needs.

I remember...

...sleeping, maybe on your stomach, in the center of the baseball field near our first house. You were singing to me about the blue sky and the puffy white clouds passing. It was beautiful and peaceful, something I'll never forget.

Funny, I can't remember what song I was singing. I do remember the one about:

The stars at night go twink-linka-link
A way up in the sky
The moon at night goes blink-linka-link
It shines right in my eye
The skunk at night goes stink-linka-link
It makes me want to cry
Oh, twink-linka-link
Oh, blink-linka-link
Oh stink-linka-link
Oh, my!

I remember...

...our college trip and visits...getting lost on the way to Bryn Mawr...the endless construction on the highway and the rainy clouds that accompanied it...canoeing on Lake George... feeling part of your history.

I remember driving the family car to Sweet Briar on my first day of college, with my mother anxiously sitting on the front seat. The way time flies, I expect Kate will soon be driving her own daughter on a college trip. I hope I'll still be around to mark that event.

I remember...

...when you sat patiently beside me during my first piano lessons. You encouraged me in ways that only mothers can.

Mrs. Mennini's Suzuki piano lessons were fascinating for me to observe, and ever so effective for Kate and David. They both absorbed the language of music and discovered a capacity for music which should always give them joy and satisfaction. David is now a virtuoso guitar and bass player, with a knack for drums and even keyboard. His tastes are so advanced that I cannot keep up with them, and his latest hobby is working with turntables, records and mixing equipment, just to combine the different rhythms and sounds. Kate plays piano by ear, mainly for relaxation, and she is practicing acoustic guitar so that she can accompany the singing at informal chapel services at college. I think that music has served them well during adolescence, not only for the pure fun of it, but also because their peers saw much talent there to respect and admire. No one at Carolina Day School could believe the big alto (Tracy Chapman) sound that came out of Kate (shy, quiet Kate?) the first time she sang there with the band.

I remember...

...the dreaded but inevitable Courtney Love. I wanted so badly to be different than you wanted me to be. You were so patient with me...keeping strong faith that someday I'd grow out of that stage.

If a parent encourages her children to learn how to play rock music on their electric guitars, there is always a risk that some of the rock culture will look attractive to the impressionable young musicians. Kate had been picking out what clothes to wear since the age of four or five, so I had to continue to respect her judgment and taste when she began to dress like Courtney

Love. I think her rebellion was more a reaction against the preppy, snobby choices of her classmates than defiance of her parents' authority.

I remember...

...the effortless ways in which you demonstrated kindness and love towards the elderly...Sarah's Circle...morning drives through Hendersonville, delivering meals to shut-ins.

All of my outreach and community service projects have not gone unnoticed. One of the first indications of how carefully I was being observed came in Lynchburg when I was on the board of the Free Clinic. I was thinking about asking the board members to make a financial contribution, and I asked Kate to help me fix up a shoe box (rather like a valentine box) with a slit in the lid. Kate helped me tape on some colorful construction paper, and I tried to explain that the money collected would help some people get to see a doctor for free. I was really surprised later to discover that Kate had secretly squeezed into the box all her money (seven dollars) from her hiding place upstairs.

I remember...

...our first fall in Roanoke. I shyly went along with you to meet the Leximas. We took their names, ages, and shoes sizes in order to give them a Merry Christmas. I received a greater gift from them: friendship. The experience forever humbled me.

Kate and I discovered that our concerns and our problems would just melt into thin air after a few hours spent in the home of our Haitian friends. We could hold babies, read books, help with homework, decipher legal documents, and get endless hugs, coming away each time feeling uplifted and refreshed. Of course, we both were learning about all we take for granted (our house, our private schools, our access to wealth and power), and we were learning about the love and courage within this remarkable refugee family.

I remember...

...our first "boys" talk. You noticed my infatuation with L.L. We sat in the front yard, in those lawn-type chairs. You carefully laid out the possible dangers, but you didn't hold me

prisoner. You allowed me the freedom to make my own mistakes, knowing that, after all, it was the only way I'd learn anything.

I wasn't at all sure I said anything of value that night.

I remember...

...how excited you seemed to meet Joy, much more than I. You noticed the possibility for change and growth a friendship with her could bring. How perceptive!

I don't think a mother can do much to influence her child's choice of friends. It is another sort of "letting go."

I remember...

No matter how bleak the horizon appeared, you always managed to provide love, cheer, and comfort for David and me.

Life becomes a war zone when a couple is breaking up. I was getting advice from my attorney that was certainly in my best interest, but who could step forward and be an advocate for the children? I never asked my kids to live with me, and they chose to continue living on the boarding school campus with their father. I missed being around them and their friends, but I'm glad I took a long range perspective. Teenagers don't like to hang around with their parents much, anyhow.

I remember...

...a certain talk we shared after my break-up with S. You had just been through the same thing so you, as usual, had excellent advice for me. That was one of the first times I viewed you as a friend, not only a mother.

Perhaps one of the most wonderful aspects of aging is the ripening relationships that develop between parents and their adult children. I wish that my dad and I had had a chance to mellow in this way. (He died when I was twenty-one.)

I remember...

...your own mother's funeral. There were several moments throughout that day where all I could do was cry. Your courage and strength inspired us all. As usual, you were the strong one for your entire family. I admire you for the bold ways you show sensitivity towards others.

I have often thought that I started out life as a sort of ugly duckling. I was burdened with glasses and a silver cap on my front tooth, my neighborhood friends in Charlotte thought my Yankee vocabulary (kids, you guys) and accent were pretty weird, and I never was content to be the sort of girl my mother wanted me to be. Over time I ditched the glasses, fixed the front tooth, and figured out how to blend in with the neighborhood. My mother and I worked through our differences and came to respect one another as adults. I felt like an ugly duckling in the boarding school world, and, to a great extent, within my marriage, but I'm finally catching on that I am, after all, not a duck, but a swan.

Kate's jar is a sort of magic looking glass which helps me lay claim to the person I am meant to be. Her memories represent my figurative day-in-court, and it will help me to make peace with the injustices of the past. I wish that Elian's ordeal could have such a happy ending.

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