

Pass It On

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A personal story from years ago:

Chapter 1. I'm ten years old.

It's the weekend, nothing to do but have fun,
and my sister Amy and I
are lolling on the floor of the room we share.
Beige carpet, bare toes. Goofing off.
Sipping nice cool Seven-Ups with ice.
We're talking about this and that.
For some reason, we start talking about breakfast cereals we like.
Golden Grahams, that's a good one.
Fruit Loops. Count Chocula, yum!
Apple Jacks.
And I was about to say another one,
but unbeknownst to me, a big burp was welling up inside me,
and what came out was not
"Sugar Smacks," as I meant to say,
but Sugar SmAAAAAcks, as the big burp flew out of my mouth.
Oh, my, it was funny. A moment which has long been remembered!

Chapter 2:

I'm all grown up now.
The phone rings and I see it's my sister calling.
I snuggle into the couch cushions as I pick up the phone.
"Hi, Aunt Laura, it's Grace!" my little niece says on the other end.
After we say hi, she launches into the tale of the day.
She says, "Mommy told me a funny story today
about when you were going to say Sugar Smacks
but you said Sugar SmAAAAAcks!"

And she laughs and laughs.
I laugh too, because it's sooo funny
hearing her retell the infamous burp moment.

But, you know, I thought about it later,
and I found it really touched me to know
my sister is teaching her daughter the stories of our childhood,
even the ones that are just completely silly.
It touches me beyond measure to know
my niece loves the stories of what her mom and I used to do
when we were kids.
These little moments—it's not like they're anything so special,
except that maybe *everything* like that is special.
It sparkles, doesn't it, those little moments,
the ordinary legacies each generation passes on to the next—
the stories, the shared silliness,
the everyday foundations of love that lasts way beyond a lifetime.

This Father's Day, my present to all you dads in the room
is the poem we heard earlier,
Ric Masten's poem about his adventures
with his granddaughter Cara.¹
It's so simple on the surface, isn't it?
Ric and Cara take a walk in the woods,

up the "barking dog trail"
to the "creaky swings"
...[and] the "sneaky table"
...[and then] through the "witchy woods"...

Little kids know how to name things, don't they?
So perfect, so personal.
When I was little, in the woods by our house
lay a fallen-over branch that looked kind of like a broomstick.

¹ Ric Masten, "Pebbles and Crumbs," from *Going Out Dancing* (Boston: Skinner House, 2008).

The perfect size for sitting on, legs dangling.
So of course we called it the “witch tree”!
The perfect place to pretend and imagine....

When we’re little, we invent whole worlds in our heads.
Even when we’re grown up, we do it too.

Remember in the book of Genesis,
the very first thing the very first human being does
is to *name* things.
God tells him, go ahead, don’t be shy,
name what you see.
And he does—
as do we all.

We all carry stories, memories, feelings about places
that maybe no one else knows about.
I think of a little stretch of woods I know—
in my mind it’s “the Robin Hood forest”
because one day when I was walking there
the light glinted just right through the leaves
and I could almost imagine leafy green men and women
moving silent through the trees...hushed, magical.
Ever since then, every time I go there,
I smile and give a silent nod to that lovely forest
that lives in my dreams.

I wonder if you have a place like that too,
or a memory, a story that conjures up a little bit of magic and grace.
And I wonder if maybe the best gift we can give our kids
is to share with them those places, the memories,
the stories that make our heart sing.
We don’t have to say or even know what they mean exactly.
The sharing is enough. It will speak.
Listen again to what we heard in the first reading.

St.-Exupéry speaks of “all of us that is wordless and full of wonder.”²
Wordless and full of wonder.

And he says:

We live, not by things, but by the meanings of things.
It is needful to transmit the passwords
from generation to generation.

We live by the *meanings* of things,
the magical worlds we carry around with us,
the real truths of our lives
that perhaps we may never, ever speak aloud.
Unless we share them,
those worlds may be lost when we are gone
and something that matters, something of beauty
will have been lost to the people we love best.

So don't hold back with the people you love.
Pass on the crazy stories,
the things that make you laugh and cry
and feel part of this gorgeous, gorgeous, heartbreaking world.
Pass it on.

Pass it on,
fix it in your mind and pass it on,
even though,
even though we know none of it will last forever.

Ric says in his poem,

last summer
Cara and I collected
and polished these moments
leaving them along the path

² Antoine de St.-Exupéry, *Singing the Living Tradition* #649.

like pebbles
to be used
in the distant future...

He calls his poem “Pebbles and Crumbs.”
The title comes from an old, old story.
Do you remember Hansel & Gretel,
the poor children lost in the fairy-tale witchy woods?
In one version, they have to go into the woods twice.
The first time, they leave pebbles along the path
so they can find their way home.
The pebbles last and last and guide them home.
But the next time, they don’t have any pebbles,
only crumbs. They drop the crumbs along the way,
hoping they’ll be there when it’s time to go home,
but of course the birds eat them.

it all becomes
a banquet for the crows,

as Ric reminds us.
Even those beautiful pebbles of memory
will turn into crumbs one day soon.
In the end they vanish into air.
Nothing lasts forever.
It’s all impermanence, all the way down.
Time keeps going and nothing lasts.
Even the dearest, most precious private memories
only last a generation or two.
But we love anyway!
We love anyway.

You know, Ric knew he was dying when he wrote this poem.
He found out in 1999 that he had prostate cancer.
He lived nine years after that.

He wrote about his cancer in poems and books.
He called his last book *Going Out Dancing*.
And what a way to go.
Going out dancing and loving
and keeping faith with everything he loved.

We could all do a lot worse.
Nothing lasts forever.
Ric says it so simply:

on some far away tomorrow...
these things, with Cara's help,
can bring me back
to life again
and thankful as I am
for such life-extending crumbs
sadly I also know...
in a couple of generations
it all becomes
a banquet for the crows.

Nothing lasts forever.
But still, *still* we sing the songs
and remember the stories
and love like crazy.
That's what we do. That's what this life is.
We tell and retell our stories,
those crystallized moments we pull out of the fleeting stream of time,
those moments when something happens,
joy sparkles,
some wordless truth is revealed.

Friends, here in this community
I've been wondering how we are going to pass on
the stories of the years we've shared together.

I'm not dying and neither are you...
not yet, anyway, we trust.
But losing a minister (and for me, losing a congregation)
is a kind of death.
We won't be able to be in relationship the way we've been.
Little things of great worth will be lost
unless we lift them up and commit them to memory
and pass them on.
So can we name together the good and bad,
the joys and sorrows?
I hope we will in the time we have left together.

We've known some good times.
I think back to the night we had a dance right here in the sanctuary,
a jazz band playing on the chancel, right here,
and we danced and danced. Such fun,
such lovely, lively energy to bring into this sacred space,
proof that joy and life *are* sacred.

I think of the small groups I've been a part of—
classes and conversations—and I remember moments
when we felt something shift in the circle—
someone shares something
and trust is deepened,
a burden is lifted,
we see each other in a new and gentler way.
Moments of holiness.

We've also known pain and confusion.
I think of the loved ones we've lost,
all the people we're still mourning.
There is such holiness there too.
And I think of the times we have disagreed
and struggled to understand each other,
times we've made each other angry,

times we have been hard-pressed to honor each other,
and even here,
even here there is holiness in the struggle
to understand, to bridge the divide, to speak,
to love more fully.

And through it all runs the tender and sorrowful truth
that nothing lasts forever on this earth.
It's all impermanence, all the way down.
Time keeps going.
But it's OK, it truly is OK.
We pass on our love and our memories,
and it will be OK.

Just the other day I came across an old church newsletter column
by the interim minister who served you a few years back,
Sean Parker Dennison. I want to read you what he said
about impermanence:

Our time together is temporary, but that's okay.
Things that don't last long are often very precious.
We treasure the blossoms in their season,
the oh-so-short sweetness of our children's baby days,
the sudden flare and disappearance of a shooting star.
If we make the most of them,
our days together will be a time we can cherish and then let go,
knowing they were days well spent.

Soon enough it's all a banquet for the crows.
But here we are today,
this precious day we have been given.
Live it now.
Savor it now.

And I wonder, I wonder, if behind the truth that nothing lasts

lies a deeper truth that nothing is lost,
all is remembered and known and cherished,
sung by the spirit that made the stars
and the crows and the children.
Could it be?
Could it be?
A banquet indeed.

Peace to us all
and joy forever.
Amen.