

Something Big

One of the hardest things about leaving our tiny house with the great big property taxes was losing forever the wall on which we recorded the name and height of my children, my foster children, and any of my daycare children who wanted to participate. Some prankster even recorded the height of one of our cats, fourteen inches or so, along with his name, David. This often provoked a perplexed, “Who’s David?” from unsuspecting visitors, much to the giggly delight of the kids. After fifteen years in our house, the wall was pretty well marked up, even if you didn’t count the gouges from the basement door banging it.

The wall was commented upon occasionally, but rarely in a sentimental way. Usually, it was one child goading another, gloating over being taller, or having grown more than the others did since the last measurement was made. Every now and then though, we’d look at the wall from a historical perspective — “That’s how tall I was when Dad moved out” — and for a moment, the little scribbles and scrawls that were there every day became important; a testament to changes big and small as moments, days, and years went by.

At age sixteen, five months pregnant, I left my home, my parents, my seven brothers and sisters, and started a new life with my husband. Everyone was worried about me, which seems perfectly understandable to me now. At the time however, I thought it demonstrated a gravely disappointing lack of faith in my abilities. I had always been a top student, responsible at home, and hardworking — I’d worked every summer since I was thirteen, typing invoices and answering the phone at the sand plant that my dad managed. I had five younger brothers and sisters, years of

experience babysitting for other families, and excellent parents who were loving and strong. I was confident that I would be a good parent too.

What about all the things you're giving up, everyone asked me. Prom, college, travel, a good job, nice place to live, church wedding, and then a family (and probably not with a convention-bucking, liberty-loving nineteen-year-old husband with the nom de guerre Dirty Curty). What about freedom?

Freedom is relative, and as someone who still had a twelve o'clock curfew, I believed I could adjust to the confines of marriage. And except for prom, which I didn't care about, I figured I would be doing all of the other stuff anyway, just in a different order than people usually do. I was in love and I believed everything would be fine. I knew there would be good times and bad times. I wasn't worried about it — even on the day after our wedding, when I wrote in my diary with complete sincerity, "Marriage is a lot harder than I thought."

We had two babies in two years and no extra money for quite a few years. But everything that matters, we had. It seemed to me that having a family made everything more important — like even doing the dishes was sort of important, because it was part of providing a clean and safe and pleasant environment for your family — it was one of the ways you demonstrated love. I had been raised, of course, to think of others, but the epiphany only truly occurred when I became a mother myself.

After my marriage ended, nearly a decade later, this transcendent aspect of everyday life did not disappear; in fact, it was amplified as I worked my way through weekend college to get my degree, doing daycare during the summers so I could be with my children, and cleaning houses during the

school year so we could go to the poorhouse a little more slowly. At first I thought we could never be happy again because our family was broken — my marriage ending was one of the greatest disappointments of my life. But even in that time of our lives, broken-hearted, all of us, we had many really wonderful times and fun, happy moments, and I saw again how being part of a family made everything good, better, and everything bad, not so bad.

My favorite poem is called “Great Things Have Happened” by the late poet Alden Nowlan. In it, Nowlan tells of people discussing the greatest events that have occurred in their lifetime. He says to the people in the poem that he supposes the greatest thing in his time would have to be the moon landing. But then he admits to the reader that the moon landing didn’t mean one-tenth as much as the time when he and his wife Claudine and son Johnny woke up at half-past four in the morning and ate cinnamon toast together.

Lately, I’ve been doing a lot of reflecting on the past — I’ve been sizing up my life. As it turns out, I did end up doing most of the important stuff that people do. It took me three and a half years to get my college degree — I could have done it in three years if it weren’t for my très terrible French classes. My family and I have lived in a trailer house, a tiny house, and a big house, and they’ve all been nice places to live. I’ve had some good jobs with low pay, a bad job with good pay, and now a cool job with decent pay. We added another child to our family when one of my foster children became available for adoption. Never did have a church wedding, but that’s all right, since my spiritual path has led me outside of mainstream religion. I never did go to prom either, although I have done plenty of unbridled and energetic dancing over the years.

And freedom? It's true that excessive amounts of unfettered freedom has never been one of my problems, but I did decide to make room for my own hopes and dreams in our day-to-day schedule. Luckily for me, my dream of being a writer is the kind of low-overhead type of ambition that can be achieved while sitting at the kitchen table.

My family is at the threshold of some big changes. At thirty-seven years old, I am almost finished with day-to-day parenting. My oldest child is twenty-one, my nineteen-year-old just moved out, and my youngest, who will be eighteen in three months, has her eye on the door. They are exactly where they should be at this moment in their lives.

The last twenty years I've measured in love given and love received. Being part of a family has meant being part of something big. I love my children and I am proud of them. They have blessed my life. Now, I take a deep breath as I look at the years ahead and wonder how I shall measure my days.