

Positive Parenting
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GROW BACK DOWN: THE GIFT OF A CHILD

... and a little child shall lead them.

Isaiah 11:6

If we listen, really listen, to children, they will share remarkable wisdom with us. In his book, *The Mystery of the Child*, Lutheran theologian Martin Marty describes children, not as blank slates on which adults are called to write, but as God's gift to us, sent to reveal God's mysteries, God's love and care, and to invite us to learn from them, as well as teach them. Jesus invited children into the center of his followers, not to model his tolerance, but to declare, "Unless you become like this little child, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." They are intended to be our teachers, indeed.

So what are you learning from children these days? Do you spend time with a child, just listening, just watching, just exploring, just being? If your answer is "yes," what have you learned? If your answer is "no," now is the time to begin.

My cherished friend Nancy, a classmate in college and a beloved friend ever since, is battling Multiple Myeloma. She had a stem cell transplant last month, yet finds opportunities to appreciate and give thanks every day. Nancy, the mother of two wondrous adult men and grandmother of two precious little boys, listens and learns, then shares it with hundreds on her CaringBridge site. Here is a recent episode, sharing what she learned from 3 1/2 year old, Samuel, in conversation with his dad, Peter, discussing the movie "Toy Story 3."

Peter: You never want to touch fire because it could hurt you.

Samuel: Just like in "Toy Story 3," when they almost got in the fire but the claw saved them.

Peter: Right!

Samuel: Then they went home, but Andy wasn't there. The little boy with the hat wasn't there.

Peter: Actually, Andy was there. The little boy with the hat wasn't there because Andy grew up and went to college. Someday you'll grow up and be big like Daddy.

Samuel: Oh. [Thinks a second.] I don't want to grow up right now.

Peter: That's OK. You don't have to grow up right now.

Samuel: But I do want to go to college!

Peter: [Laughs]

Samuel: I'm not going to grow up today. I'm going to grow up tomorrow.

Peter: That's right.

Samuel: And then, I'm going to grow back down.

Nancy adds her own reflective wisdom. "Up until recently I felt like a grown up, but now, with my new baby stem cells, I am beginning to feel like I may have taken a few steps backward to a place prior to adulthood, especially because I now need so much help from my family and friends. Here's hoping we all get to 'grow back down' again, at least for a little while."

Thank you, Samuel, for helping us understand that we can make some decisions to "grow up tomorrow" (really, there is no rush) and hear the ultimate invitation to take refuge and "grow back down." I'm going to claim that one!

FAMILY ACTIVITIES

1. Invite a child to lead you on a walk - at a park, around a lake, in a garden. Listen carefully to what the child sees and hears and understands. Then, look with a child's eyes. Experience it with a child's heart. Give thanks.
2. Have a "grow back down" day. Have each person choose something - a game, an activity, a place, a book - that they loved when they were younger. Do it again together!
3. For an adult struggling with health issues or life transitions, share the idea of "growing back down." Invite them to lean a while. Bring them dinner made up of comfort foods. Do something for them (laundry, errands, a phone call) that they have previously done for themselves. Let them know that they will grow up again, when they are ready.
4. Protect your child from the external pressures to grow up too fast. Tell adults who have age-inappropriate expectations of your child, how old your child is and that they will master that in due time.
5. In a prayer that your child hears, thank God for the gift of childhood. You listen, too!