

## 11 | Wishes

My daughter, at age thirty-one, confessed during her recent holiday visit that she had always longed for an American Girl doll when she was growing up. I received her comment with my mother-guilt in full throttle. I chastised myself for never realizing how much it mattered to her, and thought, “If I had it to do all over again, I wouldn’t hesitate to buy her Samantha.”

I sat there judging myself for the intransigence of my simple-lifestyle principles when the children were growing up. Was I just cheap, as they implied? Silently, miserably, I replayed an image from those lost years: my daughter prancing into the living room on Christmas morning, taking in all the toys surrounding our tinsel tree. I noticed for the first time how she fixed her smile, and swallowed her disappointment, and cheerfully embraced the doll-who-wasn’t-what-she-wanted. And I wept inwardly, for her, for myself, for the hurt that I caused when I could so easily have made her happy.

I guess you could call it a Christmas illusion. Or a mother illusion. Or a human illusion. How convinced I have been at the deepest level of my being that what defines a good parent

is properly psyching out my children's desires and giving them what they want!

Confronted throughout the holidays by my three adult children's unflinchingly honest reflections on our family's past, I found myself riding more waves of regret. It was the first Christmas in three years they had all come home. Now added to the mix were our daughter's Ecuadorian husband and our older son's girlfriend. We'd been separated by extreme distance and circumstance. Perhaps too by our fears of re-awakened expectations and un-examined hurts?

Our life together in years past was marked by our own private form of suffering, like many families, and our holidays were swollen with drama no one ever asked for in their letters to the North Pole. How to explain it all but to say that our youngest, the little one we adopted at birth and deeply cherished, never felt at home with us and could not stop raging from his earliest years at the arbitrariness of his life?

So our ten days together were filled with unresolved trauma, nostalgia for all that we had done "right," hope and wariness, stress levels one could cut with a knife, widely disparate needs, a remarkable spirit of truth-speaking, and the rich, undeniable love for one another I prayed would carry us through.

We were strangely accident prone at first. A cloth napkin burned to ashes on the stove top and left a hole in the kitchen counter; a prized candelabra was swept off its perch and smashed into dozens of pieces. And the visiting girlfriend discovered she was wildly allergic to our cat, so we spent half of Christmas afternoon madly scrubbing down the house we'd already worked so hard to clean. The next couple of days, I found myself rehearsing clichés: "roll with the punches," "go with the flow" as miscommunications multiplied and we never

had the expected number of people at any meal.

Just as I was settling into the unpredictability, learning to fine-tune my communication style, re-adjusting myself to being ever available but never over-attached to my children's presence or crushed by their absence, we were all shaken to the core. During a family dinner with old friends we experienced the type of quick-flash explosion that used to rock our family routinely: our younger son's violent words, the overturned chair, the stomping out of the house. And the rest of the week was colored by a renewal of sibling resentments, but with new-found, startling compassion seeping through the cracks.

When they were all gone, after ten days, I cried bitterly. I wept because I had failed once again to give my children what they wanted. They had arrived with expectations, and departed with disappointment at what we could not achieve as a family. It was just as it had always been, too much for us all, because the template of family harmony that was nestled so deep within our spirits could not manifest itself, not this Christmas, maybe never. Yet as I surrendered my grief to a wider field of awareness, a truth crept in. My children never did need me to give them everything they wanted. I did not need my parents to give me all that I yearned for either. Even while my mother lay awake each Christmas Eve worried that one child's pile of gifts was bigger than another's, my psyche was already taking a baby-step toward the lifetime challenge of embracing disappointment.

Just as I would not trade my hard-earned maturation, shaped through longing and loss, for superficial happiness, so too my children's souls know better than to think that they incarnated on this earth to be fulfilled in their every wish. As I watch them struggle and yearn, I see their adult spirits slowly taking shape, so much more complicated and multi-layered than if I had

orchestrated it all.

I still wish I had given my daughter that doll. On a higher order of magnitude, I still wish with all my heart that I could have given our youngest a sense of groundedness and belonging. I grieve that his joyful adoption into our family was mingled with the trauma of separation, and that neither our love nor our open relationship with his two biological families through the years could ever make up for his fundamental loss.

I would surely love to have had the foresight and God-like ability to make all the right choices, rendering my children's journeys sublimely tranquil and sanguine. But I have caught yet another glimpse this Christmas of how life is so much bigger, and more breathtaking, than our most fervent wishes.