

Holidays 2009

Having neither spectacular accomplishments nor grave misfortunes to report, and, to be honest, having exhausted the vein of humorous family anecdotes over the years, I will tell you instead that we are all well and fine, and hope that you are too.

Instead of Srajek family details, which are really much the same as any other family's day-to-day lives, I offer this story about something that happened to us this time last year, at the start of a long Midwest winter.

In our local paper there used to be a kid's feature called "Letters to the Editor," where school kids responded to a question from the editor, and then some responses from each school got published. One week last December, Jacob's answer to the question "What is the top item on your Christmas list this year?" turned up in the paper. He wrote that since he wanted to be a carpenter when he grew up, he had "always wanted" a carpenter's plane.

If he didn't get that, the number two thing on the list was "lots of nice building wood," a response that makes him sound quainter and less electronically minded than he really is, but, well, he was probably writing what he knew had the best chance of getting published (they're never too young to play to the crowd).

About a week after his response appeared in the paper, we received a letter in the mail from a woman we did not know. She apologized if we were not the parents of Jacob Srajek, said that she had looked us up in the phone book, and she hoped her writing was not an imposition to us. A clipping of Jacob's letter was neatly taped to the corner of her own letter, which was printed on paper with a decorative floral border.

She wrote that she herself loved working with her hands, and that she admired Jacob's knowledge that he wanted to become a carpenter, especially at such a young age. She said that she had lots of wood that was not of use to her in her own projects, and that "in the spirit of Christmas," she would be happy to give it to Jacob, if we would like that.

She offered *references* for herself, one of whom was the former president of the University of Illinois, whose secretary she was for many years until he left to become governor (no, not that one), and she left to retire.

Her name was Marcella. When I called to thank her for her lovely offer, she invited us to her home to collect the wood. So on a gray December Sunday, all five of us went. Her house looked well-tended, and there was an RV parked in the driveway. She answered the door in a peach colored twinset with matching pearls and earrings, and what my mother would call sensible shoes. She had soft white hair and kind blue eyes.

Her home was pristine, with the marks of the vacuum cleaner visible in the carpet. There was a mirrored glass display case in the entry hall filled with tiny, fragile, sparkling objects that three boys could destroy just by breathing too hard next to it.

I felt distracted and concerned by all three boys in her neat and orderly home—the muddy shoes and clutzy extremities—but she was hospitality itself, asking the boys questions about school and their interests. She told us that we were “raising fine sons.”

“And what kinds of things do you make?” I asked her, recalling that in her letter she had mentioned working with her hands. I pictured something crafty and maybe a little old-lady fussy—birdhouses or wreathes. “Well,” she said, looking thoughtful, “the last thing I built was a carport for my sister, but I haven’t done much lately since Mother was so ill.”

There were sympathy cards on her mantle piece, and leaflets from a memorial service on the kitchen table with a picture of an elderly woman on them. She said that she had been caring for her mother for several years before her recent passing, and that it was a deep loss.

She said she wasn’t sure what she was going to do now, but that she was thinking about applying for Habitat for Humanity, “if they’d have me, if I’m not too old.” Then she slapped her knees and laughed. “I’m really happiest when I’m out in the garage with my 16-bit drill! I had a garage sale this summer and I had more fun building the display tables than I did selling anything!”

Later, after we’d loaded all the wood, which was carefully boxed up and tied into bundles, into the van, we stood in the driveway next to her RV saying goodbye. It was early evening and there was a light rain. The street lights were on and the driveway was wet.

We talked about cleaning out the gutters one more time before it snowed, and I felt like we should offer to do it for her. She told us that sometimes she just put her dog and cat in the RV and they’d drive out to visit friends in Arizona, just got on the road and went. She was going to spend Christmas with her sister in Peoria, and then she’d see what she’d do.

“Thank you,” we said. “This was so kind of you.” “No,” she said, “thank you for coming.” Then she said, “I never read those letters in the paper from the kids. This one just caught my eye. Isn’t that funny?” We hugged goodbye, awkwardly, and more than one of us had tears in their eyes, and then, just like in a made-for-TV-movie, Martin said, “This feels like the real spirit of Christmas.”

When we got home, Martin and Jacob unloaded all of the wood, and they found a small gift bag at the bottom of one of the boxes. It said, “To Jacob from Marcella,” and inside was a carpenter’s plane.

One thing I'm curious about is how Jacob will remember this when he gets older. Of course it didn't seem quite as miraculous to him as it did to us, this unexpected act of kindness from a stranger at the start of what turned out to be one of the longest winters we've ever had out here.

My friend Barbara says that kindness is really only truly possible from strangers; between people well-known to each other, it's love.

Some of the poignancy of that act of kindness came from knowing that we'd probably not see her again, even though Jacob would write her a thank you note, and I'd email her some pictures of the things he built with her wood, and she'd reply telling me that she could picture him in his own woodshop one day, "sun beaming through the dusty windowpanes revealing zillions of tiny sawdust particles in the air; hand-worked wood furniture of rare beauty in various stages of completion, demonstrating the craftman's talented touch."

She also wrote, "Little did I know how much enjoyment would come from a simple gesture," and I thought, "Oh, you don't know the half of it."

We told that story a lot this year, and people just smiled and shook their heads. A favorite poet of mine, Naomi Shihab Nye says that to know kindness you first have to know sorrow, because after sorrow, and who doesn't have enough of that, you know that kindness is all there is, that:

*it is only kindness that makes sense anymore,
only kindness that ties your shoes
and sends you out into the day
to mail letters and purchase bread,
only kindness that raises its head
from the crowd of the world to say
it is I you have been looking for,
and then goes with you everywhere
like a shadow or a friend.*

This is what I wish for everyone, for all of us during these holy days, that in the crowds of our lives, we feel that kindness, the spirit of Christmas, love, is with us.

This wish goes out to you with our love and gratitude for your presence in our lives, despite the distance and busyness that creates regrettable absences.

With love and blessings,

Leslie, Martin, Noah, Jacob and Gabriel