

The Great Gamble

by Mykal White

On more days than I'd like to admit, I wonder if I am failing my daughter. There are times when I lose sight of the blessings and can only focus on my shortcomings and how those things will probably affect her in the long run. On the mornings when we have friction or there is frustration or yelling or tears, I've made my 2 hour commute into the city with a heavy heart and cloudy thoughts.

I stare out of the window and can only think how unfair it is that although she did not ask for me to be her mother - here I am, in charge of bringing her up. In those moments I feel helpless that I can't be more than the sum of all the years that lead up to that day. I think back to my own wonderful but dysfunctional childhood and I ask myself who I might have become under different circumstances. I wonder how that "other" version of me might have been better equipped at being a mom to my little girl.

Beyond those of us waist deep in the trials of parenthood, does anyone still think about this stuff? Was there anyone else feeling consumed by the challenges and frustration of setting their kid up with the most basic of life skills? I wondered why it is that adults never casually mention how long they have actively been tying their own shoes. With every 10,000 flushes, how many are inspired to call and thank their parents for the months of unwavering potty training patience that made each flush possible?

So much goes into raising a child. We make the sacrifices we do because we want it all to count somehow. On the harder, slightly darker days I would feel panicked to think of the many days that still lie ahead. The mind-boggling list of things I'd need to teach for her to be "alright" and get along in this world. I knew the challenges would only continue to get tougher. There was no way of knowing if any of it would even matter in the end.

At times, thoughts of the future and wondering how she might replay her childhood as an adult would keep me up at night. Does she know how much I love her? What will she think of me and our years together in looking back?

Will she be disappointed? Is she already? - And if so - is there still time to make things better?

Obviously, we want the best for our kids. We want them to be happy and self-reliant. Fearless, yet practical. We say, "Follow your dreams." and tell them that anything is possible. We also ask that they be responsible and insist on a back up plan in case their dreams leave bills unpaid. "Use your smarts, make good decisions." Still ...

Our greatest wish, the only thing that would seem right, is to see the fruit of our efforts reflected in the type of people they become one day. *Outcome* is what most mattered. And if not that, then what?

This thinking led to the different observations I began to make about the strangers around me. I was suddenly, very keenly aware that each adult represented an "outcome". There was this overwhelming curiosity to know the paths they'd chosen as adults. What their overall outcome had been. I needed to know if their parents were proud of them. Would they say it had all been worth it in the end? Almost obsessively for nearly two weeks, I stared at dozens of people, searching for clues that would tell me more. I watched everyone from the business-man on the train, the woman in her early 20's with two small children in tow, the gas station attendant, the woman working the drive-thru window. I fought the urge to ask a friendly customer service rep if she was truly happy in her life. Seeing a homeless man asleep with his possessions on a filthy subway platform, I tried to imagine how I might feel if this were my own son. That's when it occurred to me with such profound simplicity: *Everybody is someone's child.*

Once upon a time, each of them began as a brand new life brimming with unmet potential and promise. They, too, were babies cradled in their mother's arms, her heart overflowing with love. Promises were whispered and she dreamed the dreams we mommies dream, Hope wrapped around her child like a blanket.

Truth is, much of what I have done and will do for my own daughter through the years, are things that (to some degree) also live in the backdrops of the lives of those strangers as well. Realistically, my child could grow up to become any one of them and I didn't know how to be okay with that. It seemed I had little more than a life-sized pair of dice sent here to laugh at my attempts to create a strong foundation. I could only cringe and guess what I might have in common with that homeless man's mother.

What is the point of bringing children into this world when so much can go wrong? Why sign up for the endless worry and emotional Ferris-wheel that is parenting? *WHY??* For what purpose? Was it because we believed it would be something else entirely? Because we thought having a child would mean someone who would never leave us? Quite a gamble to take when we're given absolutely no guarantees. Of course the wonderful twist of irony is that we spend 20 years essentially weening ourselves out of a job. Eventually, we all come to realize that the lives we are guiding them towards and preparing them for ... are not our lives to live.

Then here's the other thing to think about: 4 million babies are born in the US every year and they can't all be destined for fame, success or extraordinary wealth (obviously). Although every parent imagines where our child's potential might take them, all we have to do is look around to see - the majority of us are *regular folk*. Unique in our own ways but still mostly regular. We are bank tellers, the guy who installed the cable, the person sitting in the car beside us at the light. Therefore, it would not at all be unrealistic to guess that our kids will also take their place among the regular (but unique!) as most of us have. Not so far fetched at all. In fact, it's very likely. The question is: Can we be okay with that? Would any parent really be okay with that?

Or ... Maybe deciding to have children is purely about taking a chance and believing that our child just might be the outlier. As parents, I think we're supposed to *at least* believe the possibility exists. I mean, without that would inspire us to give our very best to our children? How would the sacrifices make as much sense?

By clever design, childhood is achingly brief. It is a fading window through which we can gaze directly into the face of Purpose, itself. It is perhaps the closest we ever come to standing at eye level with *Life's*

True Objective. For a little while, childhood displays the human soul just as it's meant to be - not yet transformed by the pitfalls of ambition, the destructive human condition or arrogance of intellect.

The *Why* of children is in their ability to transcend most logic with their very presence alone. How they always manage to see such good in us especially when we can't find it ourselves. The magic of a child is in the things we learn

simply because they *are*. It is because of them that we reconsider teaching lessons learned long ago. With the scary powers of their love, they soften the places hardened by life and its disappointments. Putting action above word, our babies come here to remind us that love never fails, is not prideful and it always forgives. If not for sharing this life together, how else would we find reasons to laugh out loud and rediscover satisfaction in the simple? Already, they are wise enough not to sweat the small stuff. And we could definitely learn a lot from them about patience, fairness and leading by example. Small children can't be bothered wasting precious time holding a grudge. They totally get it.

The reality is this: We will do our part and our children will go on to become whatever and whomever they decide to become. Considering we have zero control over any portion of the future, the true rewards of having children can't possibly be tied directly into future outcomes. That would be silly and completely backwards. The very best part about having children is in all that's happening right now. Today. Last weekend. Next Tuesday.

Of course, even in understanding these things, I know hard days will come again (Life is made that way). Sad days. Days when I'm certain that I'm failing miserably as a parent in spite of my efforts. Times when I'll think of throwing my hands up and running off to some place far away ...

Somehow, I've gotta find a way to keep firmly in mind that in the midst of all these things, she is growing up anyway. Life doesn't wait. *This too shall pass.*

And by the time I've arrived at a point in this process where I find that it becomes much easier- it'll mean she's already grown. So I refocus. Remind myself to *breathe*. Remember the importance of taking it just one day at a time.

Because even the remarkable moments and the magical days so much a part of our life together right now ... shall too, pass.

Parenthood makes no promises and guarantees even less. Shame on us for believing that it might. *Uncertainty* is an element that would do us good to get better at embracing. Sooner or later, we come to recognize that we brought them into this world for no other reason than because they deserve to experience for themselves all the crazy moving parts of life. Because they deserve a chance to love and to hurt and dance and laugh and cry and decide for themselves what happiness looks like.

I've been so busy telling her what a "Big Girl" she is - that I stopped

recognizing that she really isn't a big girl at all -not yet. Her age right this very moment is what I'll come to reflect on through photographs one day, recognizing at once that she was still just a little girl *then* (Now). Once she has grown up, I'll never be given another opportunity to experience her in the way I can right now. When she is an adult, I will never get to wake up and find that she's my little girl again. Not even for one day.

Not even through video. Things will change. She will change. *We* will change. Adulthood is for keeps. Childhood is but once. Purpose lives only in the Now.

I pictured her little hands and that sweet face and those huge, wise eyes. I thought about how very much I love her. Thought of all the ways she frustrates me and all the ways I must be driving her crazy too, and I smiled. Something else occurred to me: We don't get 21 years with our kids. Not even 18 years. The days of childhood and the business of being children are already long behind them by then. In truth, a parent is only given ten short years to enjoy their child. *Ten*. That's it. The process shifts and by the age of 11 or 12, they slowly begin moving away from us and toward their own independence. Clarity washed over me as one great wave and I sat soaked in the realization that I had only 7 years left.

I got off my train at the next stop. As I waited for the train that would take me back in the opposite direction and feeling nearly electric with the appreciation that coursed through me - I notified the office I would not be in. Digging through my bag, I used the only piece of paper I could find and I wrote to my daughter. Wrote about my desire to be perfect for her and my struggles with falling short. Wrote about how guilty I'd felt because of the morning we'd had and how silly it all seemed now. Told her again how much I love her and can't imagine a time when helping her tie her shoes will no longer be part of how I start my day.

Out of paper, I put a reminder in my calendar of other funny little stories or interesting moments over the last few weeks. Things I wanted her to know. Dialogue I believed was too important to wait on being shared. I would make sure to create breadcrumbs for her *Paperbank* when I got home. And I would continue to do it as often as I could ... up until her 11th birthday. This was my "*A-ha!*" - the moment when it all finally clicked for me. *Breadcrumbs* was an opportunity; a chance to make the most of the small window that is childhood.

My heels clicked loudly on the floor of my daughter's daycare as I made a beeline straight for the office to sign her out for the day. Finally, I stood outside

Door C, marked "*Little Ducklings*" After taking a moment to slow my breathing and gather my emotions a bit, I opened the door. Didn't spot her right away as the room was full of activity by this time. Kids moving about in different sections, involved with different things. And then... there she was. My BABY. I took in the sight of my little girl as if it were my first time laying eyes on her. Noticed her pink jumper, her side ponytail, the little sneakers on her feet as if I had not been the one to dress her just that morning. Resisting the urge to race over and scoop her up, I hung back and just watched for a minute. She was in the play kitchen area throwing plastic carrots and apples and bread in a pot. Then grapes. Smiling to myself, I guessed soup.

She looked up and saw me and her eyes lit up. A gigantic smile spread across her face. The events of that morning clearly already forgotten as she ran over to me, arms raised high in the air, yelling "Mommy! Mommy! Mommy!" My heart did a flip as I bent down and reached for her. Then I burst into tears.

We stood frozen in that spot by the door, in front of her entire classroom, holding each other, communicating in silence. Her head nestled in my neck she patted my back as if she were comforting me. As if she wanted me to know that my tears had not alarmed her. That she knew I was trying, and understood I was sorry. Her little hands on my back let me know that we were just fine and of course, she still loved me. And she always would. I exhaled, wiped my eyes. Hoped she could feel my appreciation. How much I needed that.

Then the most peculiar thing happened:

She picked her head up and looked right into my eyes. Studied my face for a moment as if she, too, were seeing me for the first time. Touched my cheeks where tears had been, cocked her head to the side and gave me and gave me an equally lopsided grin. Leaning forward, whispering loud enough for only me to hear, she told me, " You're a *good girl*, Mommy." I gasped out loud and could only stare at her. She smiled a knowing smile and I gasped again. She exploded with laughter at the expression on my face. A laugh translator would not have been needed, as this one was too easy to decode: '*Silly Mommy. Why are you so surprised?*'

She knew. With her freaky, inexplicable child powers of perception, she *knew*. Could somehow sense that her mom had become just the teeniest bit more grown up in the hours since morning.

Playfully, I pretended to search her for signs that she is not a human child (something I found myself doing often as I'm not entirely convinced her origins are of this planet) This only made her laugh harder. We walked out of daycare with her delighted snorts still bouncing through the hall.

That day turned out to be beyond anything I could have known to hope for. Although I'd taken her to the playground and spread a blanket on the grass so I could watch her play, we laid across the blanket talking instead. We talked all afternoon. She talked and talked and talked about things big and small, and I listened. Looked her in her eyes and really *listened*. Wanted to understand more about what her life looked like at 3 years old.

Offering my profound thoughts on such major issues as the disappointments with hating snacks on some days and why plastic monkey bars are nowhere near as cool as the dangerous metal ones I grew up with. That kids can be cruel sometimes. The more we talked and the more I listened and gave feedback - it was humbling to realize our lives weren't very far apart. There was an awful lot we had in common. Cruel kids in daycare grow up to be cruel adults at your job.

She thought about that for a minute. *"But at least you get money to see them everyday. So that's better."* I laughed and sighed dramatically *"Oh Yeah? You think so? At least you get new teachers and a different mix of classmates each year. I'm totally trapped."* Her eyebrows turned into arches and we started cracking up with laughter at the same time.

Once she was tucked in bed and the lights were out, I sat at the foot of her bed listening to the sounds of her sleeping. I could not remember ever feeling this close to her, being able to relate to each other in the way we had. So many things I was just now grasping that she already seemed to have a handle on. Almost as if all this time she had been waiting in expectation that I would eventually catch up.

The outline of her face silhouetted in darkness, I could only wonder how long she had known. How many frustrating moments had I created for her when mornings at daycare were spent overwhelmed by how little I seemed to understand? I thought about the times she may have questioned the point of having parents. And searched to make sense of growing up. Moments when she'd fiercely questioned why grown ups never seemed proud of their shoelaces...

It made me wonder how many weeks had she spent quietly observing adults around her in consideration of the children they'd once been. Curious about the parents that loved them and took care of them long ago. Parents who, like me, also got impatient or angry at times. Distracted. Busy. Maybe she wondered how many *other* children had parents who couldn't seem to remember that being a kid is HARD - it just *looks* easy.

I knew that if given the chance, my little girl would ask those adults if they are happy now that they're grown ups. If their parents ever got around to remembering or understanding.

And with her head cocked slightly to the side and a gleam in her wise eyes, she'd ask if they believed it had all been worth it.